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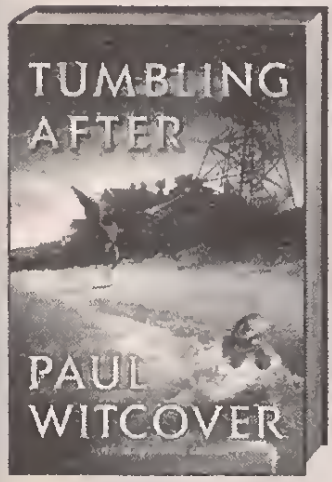
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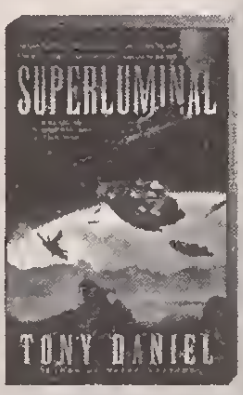


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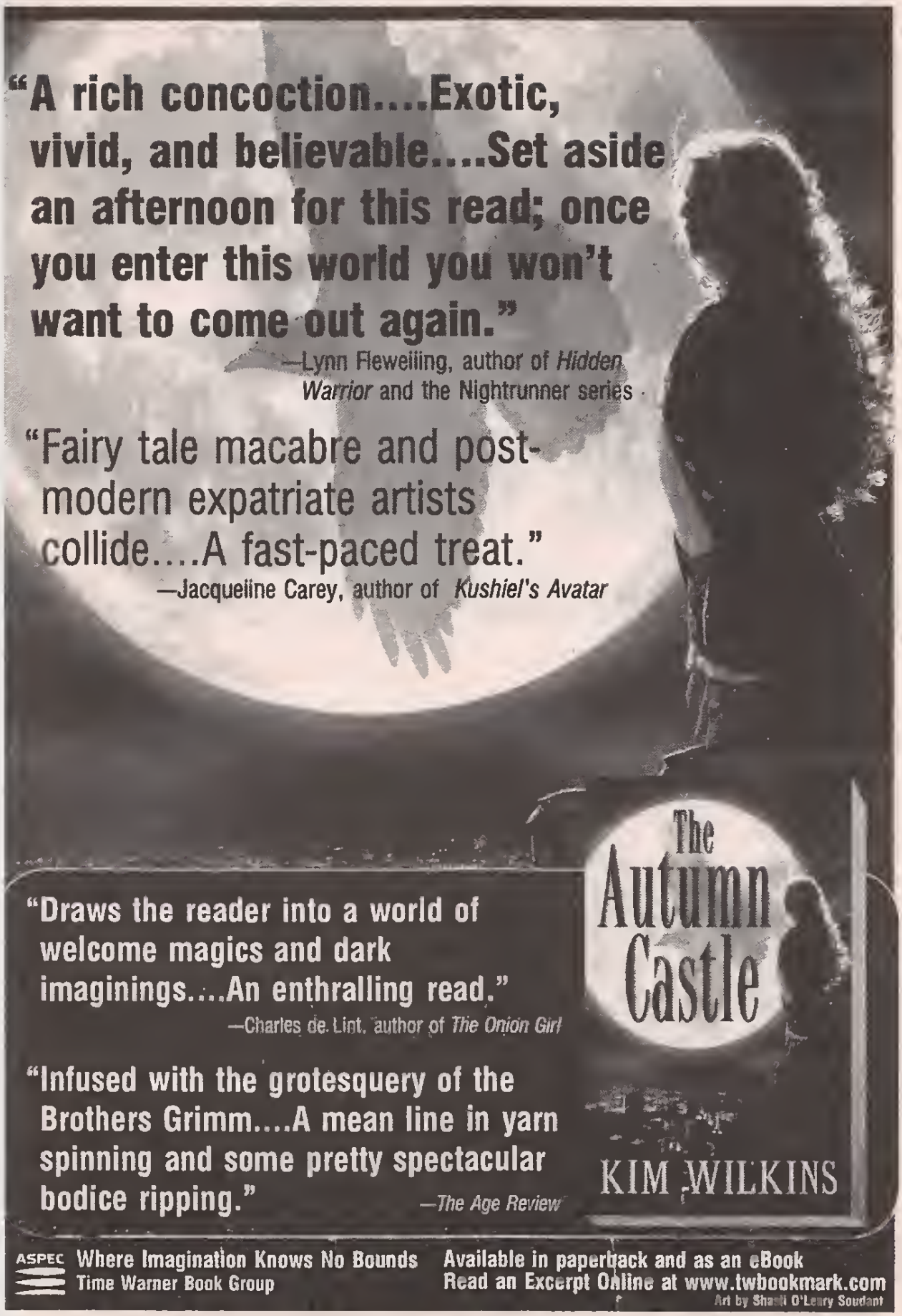
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Prolific Paul Di Filippo has published several books recently, with more due out soon, including: a novel entitled Harp, Pipe, and Symphony; *a new story collection by the name of* Emperor of Gondwanaland and Other Stories; *a comic book that picks up where Alan Moore left off,* Top 10: Beyond the Furthest Precinct; *and it's rumored that his "Plumage from Pegasus" columns will soon be gathered into book form.*

So one might gather that Mr. Di Fi knows a thing or two about the book business. Perhaps that explains the origins of this tale of love and publishing.

The Secret Sutras of Sally Strumpet

By Paul Di Filippo

RILEY SMALL'S AGENT actually called Riley personally with the good tidings. Even gruff, self-important and generally uncommunicative agents tended to be more forthcoming and pleasant when an author stood to earn the agent hundreds of thousands of dollars above and beyond all the other bales of cash the client had already brought in.

"Riley, good news," said Harvard Morgaine, his speech partly occluded by the ever-present dead cigar in his mouth, the foul smell of which Riley could vividly conjure up across the sixty Manhattan blocks separating them. "Miramax is nearly one hundred percent onboard. Weinstein is practically pissing his pants with sheer joy and greed. Know what he said to me? 'Strumpet's going to be bigger than Bridget Jones's ass.' How's that make you feel?"

Riley winced. The comparison between his book and Zellweger's method-acting butt was not one he would have chosen himself. "Uh, swell — I guess."

"Super! Okay now, there's just one problem. We've milked the mysterious author angle just about as long as we can. When Hollywood sticks its dick in the soup, there's no escaping public appearances by the author. *Entertainment Tonight*, Leno, Letterman, the whole circuit. So Sally Strumpet is going to have to finally show her face."

A sick feeling instantly pervaded Riley's gut. He'd known this day was coming ever since he had inked the contract for his book, *The Secret Sutras of Sally Strumpet*, some two years ago. But the inevitability of the fateful moment had not lessened the dread associated with the exposure of his hoax.

"Well, um, Harv, what do you suggest we do?"

"As I suss it, kid, there're only two angles to this dilemma. Either we reveal Sally's real identity — tell the world that their beloved nubile twenty-five-year-old sexual adventuress Sally Strumpet is really a deceitful thirty-five-year-old zhlub named Riley Small — or else we continue the charade by providing a living substitute for a vital person who inconveniently doesn't exist. Now, each tactic has its pluses and minuses. The upside to coming clean about your authorship of the book is that it's a simple, honest solution with no chance of blowing up in our faces, and you personally get to bask in the limelight."

"And the downside?"

"The downside is that you, me, your book, and any chance of signing the Miramax deal will go down the toilet faster than Drano. In this case, the limelight will be like napalm from above. You remember that ruckus when the supposed Native American author of *The Education of Little Tree* was revealed to be a White Supremacist?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, that little flap will look like a party at Elaine's compared with the shitstorm that us admitting the truth will bring down on our heads."

"I see...." Riley experienced a small hopeful memory of a similar literary scandal that had ended well. "Hey, what about that time in the science fiction world, when that writer everyone thought was a guy — Tipitina? — turned out to be a woman?"

"That Tiptree joker, you mean? Doesn't apply here. Women masquerading as men is cool. People cut them slack because they're perceived as the underdogs trying to make it in a man's world. But a guy shoehorning

his way into a field reserved for women — You may as well put your balls into a noose."

Riley winced as Morgaine continued his pitch.

"Now, as far as ramping up the masquerade goes, we're compounding your original sin by orders of magnitude, opening us up to even worse public ridicule and hatred if we're ever exposed. Which of course, God willing, we won't be. But the commensurate upside is that we both get a shot to ride this baby all the way to a villa in Tuscany and a little grass shack in Maui for each of us. So, what's it going to be?"

Riley could hear Morgaine ferociously chewing his cigar. The silence between author and agent seemed to stretch out forever. Riley considered his future under both scenarios. More importantly, he considered his past, the impulses and circumstances that had led him to write *The Secret Sutras of Sally Strumpet* in the first place. The memories of those despairing days were ultimately what determined his answer.

"Do I get to interview the women we'll be considering to play Sally?"

"Kid, I got a deskful of headshots for you to start looking at right now."

At age thirty-three, Riley Small had felt crucified on the cross of his own ambitions.

Since college, Riley had been convinced that he would some day be a famous writer. Some fairly significant talent on his part had been adduced by encouraging teachers and friends, convincing Riley that he had the chops to write a great book or three, thus gaining admission into the ranks of the masters he loved. But upon graduation, his dreams began to deflate faster than a parachute sucked into a jet engine. The manuscripts of his first two novels kept coming back from publishers with pleasant but firm brushoffs. *The New Yorker* and *The Paris Review* declined to add Riley's name to their table-of-contents pages. Virtually every big-name and not-so-big-name agent listed in the *Writer's Digest* guides had very politely failed to respond to his every solicitation for representation of his masterpieces-to-be.

Despite setbacks that would have sent a lesser soul into a screaming retreat, Riley persisted with his dreams. To keep body firmly united with soul, Riley held a number of mediocre jobs on the edges of the publishing industry. By age thirty-three, he had ascended to the unremarkable

position of assistant editor at a third-tier "lad" magazine, a publication titled *Royale*. ("Hey — get *Royale*!" was the magazine's advertising tagline. The staffers, however, referred to their employer as "Roy's Ale," for the sixpack-mentality of its average subscriber.) At the magazine, Riley proofed articles on South American aphrodisiacs and the sexual kinks of celebrities, all the while plotting his next assault on the Fortress of Literature.

In parallel with his many defeats on the literary front, Riley had also sustained over the sad years more than his share of grievous damage on the romantic battlefield. His unswerving focus on making it as a writer tended to cause him to be less than attentive to such female-appreciated matters as compliments, punctuality, and the kind of social minutiae that insured that any book that utilized Jane Austen as a template would vault to the ranks of bestsellerdom.

But in Riley's partial defense, he felt, there were other factors behind his dismal string of romantic failures than mere masculine inattention. Young single urban women today seemed incapable of sustaining any relationship that did not conform to an unreal mass-media template. Tutored by television, movies, and books to expect the perfect boyfriend to be rich, handsome, romantic, witty, faithful, and adoring, while at the same time encouraged to be demanding, capricious, over-sensitive, boisterous, and egocentric, the women Riley met and fell in love with invariably undermined any potentially long-term relationship. Not by being horrible bitches by any means. No, their hearts were generally good. But they were all just confused about how to reconcile their factitious needs with the realities of the male character.

Raised on a diet of pink and aqua dreams of having perfectly glossy hair, perfectly rewarding careers, a perfect set of female friends and perfectly attentive lovers, the women Riley found himself dating were perfectly impossible.

So a succession of live-in affairs had each eventually degenerated into a tense disentangling of formerly shared possessions and the curt exchange of forwarding addresses. At thirty-three, Riley was living alone — miserably, but at least unshoutingly.

It was at this downhearted juncture in his failed life that Riley was struck by his purest moment of literary inspiration.

Browsing the fiction shelves at the Union Square branch of Barnes & Noble one Saturday, Riley had been overwhelmed by the number of chick-lit books, and the lofty positions they occupied on various bestseller lists. He had taken a stack of these novels to a chair and begun to read. At the end of four hours, he knew several things.

1) The psyches of these heroines matched those of Riley's ex-girlfriends almost exactly.

2) At the core of each book was a desire to be accepted despite one's imperfections.

3) On a practical level, nothing would screw up a working girl's day worse than a laddering tear in her pantyhose. Unless it was a wild, cocaine-fueled orgy in the company's co-ed john.

And 4), Riley fervently understood that he could write one of these books.

It took Riley six white-hot months to write *The Secret Sutras of Sally Strumpet*. Into this book he poured the powerful twin streams of both his romantic and artistic frustrations. He found that by combining all the endearingly ditzy and annoyingly winsome qualities of his numerous past lovers into one figure, while minimizing their foibles (all in the interests of readerly self-identification), he had distilled a kind of Ur-heroine who possessed enormous capabilities, charms, and appetites while remaining fascinatingly flawed. Sally Strumpet practically seemed to leap off the page, an adventurous Everywoman evoking readerly empathy, summoned from deep within Riley's anima.

Strictly to formula, the book, despite various narrative detours, was a quest for love. Sally had to work her way through a series of losers before meeting Mr. Right. Sally's stereotypically disappointing paramours all shared the various flaws of which Riley had heard himself accused. Riley constructed Sally's ultimate dream beau — a supernaturally handsome Tierra del Fuegan sheepherder named Esteban Badura — by blending elements of Enrique Iglesias, Antonio Banderas, and Dr. Phil.

And by rigorously excluding everything he knew about great literature, he was able to fashion a thin yet stickily enticing prose style eminently suited to bestsellerdom — the literary equivalent of flypaper.

Riley cast the book as a partially disguised fictionalization of the

actual exploits of the pseudonym-concealed "Sally Strumpet." A cleverly worded disclaimer up front insured that the reader could not think otherwise. Judiciously salted with references to barely veiled real persons, places, and events, the narrative slyly borrowed most of its plot from such classics as *Tom Jones*, *Fanny Hill*, *Candy*, and *Fear of Flying*. (The latter novel being utilized despite Jong's insistence that none of what she wrote qualified as chick-lit.) Of course, plenty of modern touches — heartfelt cell phone and e-mail exchanges; massive shopping expeditions; numerous movie references — concealed these borrowings. Riley even managed to salve his literary credentials with his own soul by modeling the big climax on certain scenes from *Ulysses*. Just to ice the cake, Riley layered in some borrowed mysticism from a dozen New Age philosophies, thus justifying the whimsical title.

Once the book was finished, Riley knew he had written a masterpiece — of its type. He began marketing it with a dedication he had never expended before on his serious work. He concentrated solely on attracting an agent, since he wanted an intermediary between him and any publisher, to preserve the facade of female authorship. He met Harvard Morgaine at a party sponsored by *Royale*, and managed to convince the dapper, silver-haired agent to read the manuscript. Morgaine swiftly recognized the virtues of the book, and agreed to rep it.

The contract Morgaine secured from Aleatory House was for a moderate seventy-five-thousand-dollar advance. The first printing was set at fifty thousand copies.

Those copies sold out in five weeks.

Now, nearly a year after publication, Riley's book remained in every top ten list, fluctuating in sales according to various bouts of publicity but never dropping below the number-ten spot on any national list. Once the announcement of an impending movie was made, sales would doubtlessly soar even higher.

Riley now had more money than he had ever imagined having.

But none of the other joys of authorship.

Those belonged to Sally Strumpet.

Who had, despite her endearing ways, proved to be a treacherous bitch.

* * *

"Okay, Riley," said Morgaine, "I've winnowed down our possibles to twenty candidates, based on their physical resemblance to Sally, the way she describes herself in the book."

"Harv, I wrote the book, remember? Not Sally. Sally doesn't exist."

Morgaine extracted his soggy cigar and waved it dismissively. "Of course, of course. Just a manner of speaking. You did such a convincing job bringing her to life, it's only natural to talk about her like she really exists. Which she soon will. After a limited fashion. Anyhow, all I need you to do now is give me your opinion about which gal has that special Strumpet strut. We really need to pick someone who can convince the world that she wrote *Secret Sutras*."

Riley leaned back wearily in one of the leather chairs in Morgaine's office. The two men were alone. Riley's gaze traveled the shelves lined with the books written by Morgaine's clients. His eyes jerked away from the multiple copies of *Secret Sutras* in their saccharine pastel covers. Next to those abominations stood last year's winner of the National Book Award, contributed by another client of Morgaine's. By all rights, a Riley Small novel should have rested there. But instead, Riley's only legacy, totally anonymous, was a book that felt like it had been ghost-written for some selfish, larger-than-life celebrity.

Knuckling his eyes, Riley said, "Okay, Harv, I'll try. Let's hope the perfect Sally Strumpet is waiting for us out there."

Morgaine resocketed his cigar and slapped Riley's knee. "Excellent! Let's get the girls onto the catwalk. And remember — none of these babes know what we're really interviewing them for. The last thing we need is for word to get out that we're searching for a Strumpet lookalike."

Summoned by intercom, Morgaine's office assistant — the perky, petite Nia Poole — conducted the first candidate in.

Sally Strumpet, the whole world knew, was fashion-model tall, "but not as skinny as one of those masochistic walking clothes-hangers. I'm quite nicely padded in fact, from addiction to Cheesecake Factory goodies. In a perfect world, they'd use me as their spokeswoman!" She possessed a "tawny mane of curls that owes more to nurture than nature — nurture being defined as the tender ministrations of the fabulous Mr. Jean." She liked to dress casually, especially for her rough-and-tumble job as videocam operator for a cable news program. But she could stun a room of men when

really dolled up, like that time when she crashed the UN reception for President Putin. (It was at the UN that she had met Esteban Badura, who was present so far from his sheep to testify about global warming in his South American homeland.)

The woman who entered the office now matched many of the Sally Strumpet specs. But Riley could immediately tell she wasn't right for the impersonation. Her face was too harsh and angular, her attitude too cruel. The planes of her cheeks looked like they had been sharpened on a grindstone. Without being invited, the woman sat down and crossed her legs as if she were Sharon Stone under interrogation. Spotting Morgaine's dead cigar, she took that icon as permission to light up a cigarette of her own.

"This gig include medical coverage? 'Cos I've got this pre-existing condition — "

Riley rolled his eyes, trying to signal Morgaine to cut this interview short. But the agent was politely persisting in questioning the woman, as if she could ever possibly stand in for Sally Strumpet.

Once the first candidate left, Morgaine turned hopefully to Riley. "So, what'd you think?"

"Harv, I would sooner dress up in drag myself than hire that woman. She would disgrace Sally's good name. Jesus, I thought she was going to slit both our throats for the sheer thrill of it with those daggers she called fingernails!"

"All right, maybe she wasn't perfect. But we've got nineteen more to go."

The next woman radiated more of Sally's innocent *joie de vivre*. But when she saw Morgaine's library she uttered a brazen squawk and said, "Jesus, look at all them books! What're you guys anyway, perfessers?"

The third candidate also failed Riley's inspection when she opened her mouth. But it was not her choice of words, but rather the timbre of her voice, which sounded like Fran Drescher's filtered through George Burns's vocal cords.

And so the afternoon went, each succeeding woman presenting some fatal flaw of either looks, character, or intelligence. Four hours after they had started, both Morgaine and Riley were exhausted and dispirited.

"I thought number twelve had potential — " Morgaine gamely ventured.

"You mean potential to fall forward onto her face at any minute? Oh, excuse me, her face would never hit the ground! I've never seen such an outrageous boob job. She had to have ten pounds of silicone in each tit, for Christ's sake!"

Morgaine smiled wistfully at the memory. "I was going to ask you if we could alter the next printing of your book to include some amplified chest dimensions for Sally, but I guess you wouldn't — "

Riley surged abruptly out of his chair, nearly tipping it over. "Damn it, Harv, that tears it! It's bad enough I created this monster in the first place, but I'm certainly not giving her retroactive knockers bigger than her head! Like none of the previous readers would even notice the changes, either! Look, I'm going home now. Call me when you need me again."

"That'll be tomorrow. Those women all came from just one agency, and I've got dozens of others lined up."

"Wonderful, just wonderful. I can hardly wait."

IN THE TAXI back to his apartment, Riley was plagued by a kaleidoscope of shifting faces. All the mock-Sally Strumpets he had interviewed rose and fell before his mind's eye, leering and grimacing, beckoning and taunting. They had all been just close enough to the "real" Sally to freak Riley out. He felt that some malign deity had stolen his brainchild and warped her over and over again, creating twisted versions of his ideal.

When Sally had existed only in Riley's mind, she had been utterly self-consistent and authentic. Her transfer to the printed page had diluted her nature and character a trifle. But this final attempt at actually instantiating her in the flesh threatened to corrupt her entirely. Was it possible for a Platonic ideal ever to manifest in this degenerate realm? Yet cruel circumstances dictated that he had to continue trying.

How he would find the strength to face tomorrow's interviews and any subsequent ones, he could not say.

When success had finally visited Riley, he had immediately done two things. He had quit *Royale* magazine — not in a thundering fit of denunciation; after all, he had not been mistreated, and the amiable if dead-end job had paid the rent — and he had gotten new digs. From a crappy studio in Hell's Kitchen he had moved to a modest co-op on the

Upper East Side. Doorman, concierge, snooty neighbors, expensive little pampered dogs, the whole works. Riley hadn't enjoyed his new living quarters as thoroughly as he had thought he would. The sterility of the neighborhood depressed him. But he felt his new status as a best-selling (anonymous) author required him to live in such respectable terrain.

Up in his co-op, Riley kicked off his shoes, took a beer from his immaculate Sub-Zero fridge and slumped down in front of his theater-sized TV. With alcohol and cable, he vowed to shut his brain off for the night.

Halfway through a rerun of *Who Wants to Create a Reality Show?*, there came a rather assertive knocking on Riley's door. Muzzy from his fourth beer, he staggered to answer the summons. Halfway to the door, he wondered who could be visiting him, and how they had gotten past the building's staff without Riley being informed.

Riley tried to peer through the peephole but couldn't get his bleary eye to focus. "Screw it." He twisted the handle and yanked the door inward, banging it into his unshod toes.

"Jesus Christ!" Riley bent to soothe the aggrieved foot. When he straightened, his visitor had impertinently stepped inside.

Sally Strumpet wore black jeans, nicely packed, and scuffed red leather clogs. A ratty leather jacket gaped open to reveal a white button-front shirt over an ample but not outrageous bosom. Her irrepressible mass of curls was partially tamed by a scrunchy, but a few tendrils escaped to frame her face. She stood an inch or two taller than Riley, and her smile was the same one she had displayed when she had triumphed over weather-girl Gwen York, her hated rival, for the affections of Jack Burleigh, the newsman at the station where they all worked.

Riley's brain threatened meltdown. Disaster klaxons seemed to fill his ears. Yet somehow he could still hear Sally clearly when she spoke. Her voice was as poignantly real as his mother's, and as sexy as Kathleen Turner reciting Anaïs Nin's pornography.

"I understand you've been looking for me, so here I am. Are you alone now? Is this a good time?"

"Who — who are you?" The question was meaningless in the face of Sally's majestic presence, but Riley could summon up no other words.

Sally stepped boldly inside and closed the door behind her. "Oh, I

think you know quite well who I am, Mr. Big." The woman winked and grinned at this play on Riley's surname, but when Riley remained stonefaced, her brave expression cracked a little. "Unless you've forgotten me so soon?"

Riley found himself somehow on the far side of the room from the woman, his instinctive retreat stopped only by the windows that afforded him a minuscule view of Central Park when he craned awkwardly. "You're some kind of actress. You have to be. You can't be Sally Strumpet. She doesn't exist. I invented her."

Sally spread her arms wide and arched her back like a lazy tiger, lending a disturbing prominence to her chest. "Do I really look like some cheap figment of your imagination? You can believe whatever you want about my origins, but you can't deny I'm real." Sally slapped her generous butt. "At least that's what the scale tells me every morning."

Riley began to grow irritated. "You have to be a joke, right? Well, it's not funny. Who sent you? How did you get this address? Are you from one of the tabloids? Where's the camera?" Riley could just see his goofy face plastered all over Page Sixes around the globe under the headline HOAX AUTHOR UNMASKED, FALLS FOR HIS OWN SCAM.

The intruder assumed a truly crestfallen look that verged on the tearful. "Gee, Mr. Oh-So-Big, I know I'm not much to look at or every man's dream date, but no girl likes having her very identity denied. Are you asking me to just shrivel up and disappear?"

Riley felt sheepish at his rudeness. Whoever this woman was, she had done nothing yet to earn his disrespect. Better to take her at her impossible word and see where such a tactic led. "All right then, you're Sally Strumpet. What are you doing here?"

Sally brightened up into a semblance of mild outrage. "I'm pissed! You're trying to find someone to impersonate me. I don't want some cheap tramp parading around the world and abusing my image like a street-vendor's knockoff Prada handbag. Those girls you interviewed today were all dimwits and roundheels!"

Roundheels. That was an archaic term Riley loved and one which he had put in Sally's mouth on more than one occasion. "How — how did you — ?"

Sally winked. "Oh, I see a lot of things. Anyhow, you don't need to

look any further for someone to hide your authorship behind. You've got me now. Tomorrow morning, you're going to call Morgaine and tell him to cancel the auditions. Then we'll go in and meet with him to start arranging my public appearances."

Riley considered the ultimatum. This woman, whoever she was, looked and acted so much like Sally Strumpet that no other candidate could possibly compete. Sure, she was brash and crazy, maybe a stalker even, bursting in on him like this instead of just showing up at Morgaine's office during the auditions with the other candidates. But why not accept fate, and use her as she proposed?

"Suppose I agree to your plan? What're your terms?"

Sally waved the question aside. "Oh, I'm sure we can work out something mutually agreeable."

"Well, okay, then. I guess we've got a deal."

Riley extended his hand to shake, fully expecting to encounter the grip of a ghost. But Sally's handshake was firm and warm.

"Now, where can I reach you tomorrow?"

Sally shucked off her jacket and threw it on the couch. Twin flicks of her feet disposed of her clogs. "Right here, if it's okay with you. I don't have any other place to stay at the moment. And I figure that since my life story bought this place, I've got as much right to be here as you. Unless you're seeing someone else these days. It wouldn't be the first time a guy ditched me after I helped him reach success."

Riley hardly knew how to respond. He did owe his current stature to Sally Strumpet. But this woman wasn't her — was she? How could she be? He had invented Sally! Yet this familiar stranger acted so certain of her own identity —

Riley contemplated another lonely night spent in his empty bed. "No, I'm not seeing anyone else. You can stay."

"Great!" The couch received Sally's shapely butt alongside her jacket. She smiled wickedly up at Riley and patted a cushion. "Now, have a seat. Relax. We've got a lot to talk about. Remember my third sutra? 'Intense private conversation between a man and a woman is the high road to a lowdown activity.'" She giggled and looked at Riley with a becoming blush creeping across her cheeks. "God, I've never actually said that to a man before. But I know that you above anyone will understand."

* * *

Riley had never seen Harvard Morgaine at a loss for words. The agent was generally unflappable, ready with a rude comeback or salty quip for any circumstance. But encountering the forceful reality of the woman who refused to answer to any name other than "Sally Strumpet" left Morgaine deflated, empty of easy rejoinders or useful conclusions.

Riley and his agent sat unaccompanied in Morgaine's office. Sally had been dispatched on a shopping trip with Morgaine's assistant, Nia Poole, abetted by the agency's credit card. Along with her lack of residence, Sally claimed not to have any current wardrobe other than the clothes on her back. That deficit was being remedied even as Riley and Morgaine sought to piece together their thoughts.

Riley spoke first. "She didn't lay any claim to my royalties then?"

"No, not a cent. She signed the contract I had ready without a second's hesitation. Salary of five thousand a week for an unspecified period. She quoted one of the sutras: 'Needy girls do not have to be greedy girls.'"

"Number fourteen."

"Whatever. It's damn good money, sure, but not a patch on what she might've asked for, if she really is sticking to this crazy claim that she's the one and only Sally Strumpet, author of your book."

Morgaine took the dead cigar from his mouth and studied it a long moment before speaking again. "And Christ knows, I might've sided with her if she pushed the claim. Sorry, kid, but she's that good."

"You're telling me. I almost believe her insane story myself."

Riley recalled what had happened last night.

Several hours of talking, mostly by Sally, had served to update Riley on everything in Sally's life that had purportedly occurred to her since the close of *Secret Sutras*. Not once did she depart from the implicit assertion that she was the fictional heroine of Riley's book. Her narrative had been utterly consistent with the events of the book, forming a sequel that Riley might have written himself. He experienced a genuine pang at the sad fate of handsome shepherd Esteban Badura, lost to a rapacious melanoma engendered by the ozone hole over his native land. Riley even felt himself tearing up when Sally recounted how her Tierra del Fuegan in-laws had heroically taken over the shepherding duties, allowing Sally to return to the U.S.A. and seek solace in work and possibly even a new companion.

Imagine Sally's surprise when she had found herself a celebrity thanks to a certain book.

Afterward, as half-promised, Riley and Sally had indeed moved to the bedroom. There, Riley experienced what was simply the best sex of his life. He was hardly surprised that he knew intimately all of Sally's turn-ons and could pleasure her with unfailing insight. After all, he had invented her, right? It was like God knowing what went on in, say, a cat's brain.

The congruity between Sally's desires and Riley's moves engendered in Riley a greater confidence than any he had ever felt before while in bed with a woman. Even if this impossible incarnation of Sally failed to fulfill Morgaine's need for a PR campaign beard, she was doing wonders for Riley's libido.

But there was one creepy thing about their lovemaking: Sally's ability to anticipate all of Riley's specific desires. How could the creation know the creator so well? Had this happened with Galatea and her sculptor? Riley began to wonder who really filled which role, and grew slightly nauseated with a kind of freshman existential angst.

But he wasn't truly spooked until, on the verge of sleep, Sally quoted the twenty-fifth sutra: "'The only thing better than afterplay late at night is foreplay early in the morning.'"

Having heard that, Riley jolted out of his drowsy stupor and lay awake staring at the ceiling for the next three hours.

There were only two dozen sutras in the published book, one for each chapter. In an early draft, Riley had indeed included a twenty-fifth, the very maxim Sally had just quoted.

But no one, not even Harvard Morgaine, had ever seen that deleted chapter. Riley had been saving that twenty-fifth sutra for a sequel.

Morgaine snapped his fingers in front of Riley's face. "Don't go catatonic on me so soon, Small. I need you to keep your head screwed on straight during this charade. It's going to be a year and half, more likely two, until the movie debuts and we can gradually phase this chick out. We're going to have to work hand in glove with her all that time. If she's going to send you to la-la land every time you think about her, then we've got a problem. We need you to ride herd on her in public and feed her lines."

"Feed her lines? You've talked to her, Harvard. She knows the book better than I do. And as for improvising, she's more totally in character than de Niro. And what do you mean, 'ride herd on her?'"

"I've got it all set up. You're her publicist now. You'll accompany her everywhere, make sure she doesn't flip out and screw us over somehow. I even got you a salary from Aleatory House! After all, before today, they didn't know you even existed in any other role."

"Oh, now, Harvard, wait just a goddamn minute — "

"There's no backing out, Small. We can't just turn this broad loose unsupervised. And I can't do the hand-holding, I've got a fricking literary agency to run. Look at it this way: it's the exact same schedule you'd have to follow if you were actually known in public as the author, but this way you're getting an extra paycheck for your time."

"Oh, Jesus, this is totally humiliating. To stand there in the shadows like a flunky while she gets all the glory. I can't believe this."

"Believe it — or else."

Laden with packages, Sally and Nia returned several hours later, hours which Riley had spent pissily bemoaning his lot to a hard-hearted Morgaine.

Sally dumped an armful of Bergdorf boxes into Riley's lap. "Whew! I'm exhausted."

"Why?" Riley asked.

"What's my favorite color, Mr. Big?"

"Uh, pumpkin."

"Correctomundo. You have any idea how hard it is to find a matching bra, thong and sandals in pumpkin?"

THE NEXT THREE MONTHS of Riley Small's life were composed of equal parts boredom, jealousy, pride, humiliation and excruciating bliss. He felt like a torture victim who had earned conjugal visits between sessions on the rack.

The debut of Sally Strumpet caused a firestorm in the media akin to the release of nude pictures of J. K. Rowling. After so long in seclusion, the author of the sexy bestseller was as much in demand as a close-mouthed presidential advisor at a congressional hearing. Sally was booked onto

every possible TV show, from dawn to the wee hours of the morning. Any time left free in her schedule was devoted to print interviews and photo shoots. Charity events and award galas thrummed to her triumphant, engaging presence. The hottest clubs in Manhattan and L.A. played host to her leisure-time, paparazzi-attracting activities..

Sally endeared herself to her public by her general air of gawky competence and klutzy charm. The disaster she caused on Regis and Kelly's show, for instance, with the exploding quiche, caused a million female viewers to bond with her instantly.

But one phenomenon that truly frightened Riley was the way that real people stepped out from the woodwork claiming to know Sally and to be the originals of figures in her book. Their impossible assertions bestowed on Sally even more existential validity and heft. Riley found it particularly hard, for instance, to meet with the other women in Sally's ritual Tuesday-night reading group. Not just because he had invented them all — hadn't he? — but because one of them, Lynda Gorodetsky, was an ardent man-hater and stared poisonous daggers at Riley throughout the entire meal they all shared.

Despite his unease throughout the mad whirl, Riley stayed by her side in the role of humble publicist. Ignored by anyone of importance, forced to listen over and over to the same line of inane chatter about his misbegotten bestseller, he felt his grip on sanity slipping. Occasionally, when Sally performed particularly well, Riley could take some pleasure in hearing certain bon mots from his novel rendered in a witty manner. But for the most part, the whole concept of Sally and her libidinous escapades quickly palled for Riley, especially after that time on Oprah's show when, as he lurked in the Green Room, Sally began describing her current sex life with him. The anecdotes were all flattering — too flattering, perhaps — and she didn't use his name. But Riley's ears and other portions of his anatomy were left burning nonetheless.

Sally herself, up close in tangible form, presented even more challenges.

Ms. Strumpet had elected to continue living at Riley's digs. And to continue occupying his bed. Even when the pair were on the road, she managed to sneak into Riley's room late at night when all the tabloid swarm had dissipated. She seemed to have no interest in taking any other lovers, despite myriad opportunities. Remarkably, sex with Sally managed to

remain at the same high peak of their first encounter. Nonetheless, Riley felt simultaneously fulfilled and unsatisfied, as if he were screwing a woman created to match his exact desirability specs, but one who could never surprise him.

Riley couldn't figure out why he continued to remain as Sally's lover. Did she satisfy all his needs in a healthy manner, or simply cancel them out like a key fitting into a lock? Was he good for her, or merely a programmed response?

He tried to speak to Sally about these paradoxes. They did communicate reasonably well, both in bed and out, so long as certain topics regarding her origin and his slave status were ignored. But all she did was quote sutra number nine to him: "'The more familiar a woman becomes to a man, the less he knows about her.'"

On a day that was remarkably free of commitments back in Manhattan, Riley went to see Harvard Morgaine. (Sally was busy getting her hair done.)

Morgaine ushered Riley heartily into his office. "Welcome home, kid. I couldn't be happier about how things are going. I assume you're monitoring your bank account hourly, just like me. Sales of the book are way, way up of course, and the first check from Miramax has cleared. I hope you appreciated how many points I negotiated for our share of the box office. I was absolutely brilliant! You're a lucky bastard to have me for an agent, kid!"

Morgaine's joyous avarice left Riley even more dispirited than when he had entered the office. "Harv, I just can't take any of this *Secret Sutras* stuff anymore. I'm ready to crack. I need a vacation."

"A vacation? Well, why not! Sally is unsinkable now after all she's been through. And if she was planning to shaft us, she'd have done it by now. Hit the road, kid, and have yourself a ball."

"You — you'll tell Sally I'm leaving, okay? But not where I'm going. Because I can't — "

Morgaine clapped Riley on the back. "Sure, no problem. Leave her to me."

Feeling somewhat more hopeful, Riley went to the travel agent closest to Morgaine's office and booked a flight leaving that day for Cancun, before he changed his mind or Sally could change it for him.

Twelve hours later he was sitting by a palm-fronded bar sipping a mojito. Despite the presence of a poster of Sally's smiling face, with text in Spanish advertising *Las Sutras Secretas de Sally Ramera*, Riley felt better than he had in ages. A weight seemed to have been lifted off his shoulders. He could breathe again. His soul floated lightly inside him.

For the next week, Riley led a mindless existence, soaking up sun and rum, swimming, admiring women who weren't Sally. He began to believe that there would be some kind of life for him outside of the whole *Secret Sutras* morass.

Eventually, one thing led to another and Riley found himself one langorous afternoon undressing in the room of a very attractive blonde legal secretary from Duluth named Sharon.

After a long embrace and kiss, Sharon excused herself. "Get in bed, honey. I'll be right back."

Riley watched her disappear into the bathroom from his recumbent vantage on the tropic-patterned sheets. Despite his excitement, he felt a little drowsy, and half-closed his eyes.

Not more than a minute could've passed before Sharon reappeared, wrapped in a towel. She did not bound amorously toward the bed, but instead seemed preoccupied, moving to the bureau to rummage around on its top for something.

Eventually she turned her head. As soon as she saw Riley, she screamed.

"Who are you! What're you doing here!"

Riley jumped up, all his lust deflated by her shriek. "Sharon, that's not funny. You invited me in. We were going to make love. My name's Riley — "

"Get out! Get out!"

Riley hastily dressed and scrammed.

For the rest of the day he waited nervously in his room, every minute expecting to be approached by a resort executive or, worse, a corrupt and tyrannical Mexican police officer who would demand that Riley explain his rapist ways. But no such confrontation occurred, and finally Riley managed to fall uneasily asleep, even without supper.

In the morning he was awakened by the sound of his own door opening. In walked what was obviously a honeymooning couple escorted

by a lowly hotel employee burdened with baggage. When the newcomers spotted Riley in bed, there was much confusion and embarrassment. Riley grew indignant at the luggage-toter's insistence that this room was supposed to be vacant. Once the intruders had been shooed off, Riley dressed and went to speak to the manager, with whom he had developed a casual relationship.

The portly, mustached man regarded Riley as if he were an undistinguished new species of bug. "I'm sorry, Señor, but I must contradict your account of our mutual friendship established this past week. Especially as we have no record of your registration at our resort. Obviously there has been some mistake. You will have to register for the first time — for the second time, if you insist — or else vacate your room."

Riley felt spectral hands on his shoulder, claws knotting in his guts. He chose to vacate.

At the airport, he was relieved to discover that his open-dated return ticket was still accepted at face value. The inspection of his passport was cursory. Just as well. Riley suspected that the document would not hold up any longer to in-depth confirmation by authorities.

The flight home was interminable. By the time the taxi dropped Riley off at the door of his co-op, he was trembling with exhaustion and trepidation. Wearily manhandling his bag, he approached the doorman.

"How may I help you, sir? Whom do you wish to visit?"

Riley stiffened in shock. Not here, too — "Aw, c'mon, Jeff, it's me, Riley Small. I live in 1203 — "

A veil of disgust dropped over the doorman's features and he lost all semblance of good manners. "Another groupie for Ms. Strumpet, huh? How many of you guys do I have to get arrested before you all get the message?"

Riley set off jogging, his bag pitilessly thumping his vertebrae.

At Harvard Morgaine's office, Nia Poole erected a formidable barrier of professional indifference toward this intruder claiming he was a Morgaine client, but Riley finally managed to get admitted to Morgaine's inner sanctum on the strength of some personal details about Morgaine that he disclosed. Nia seemed shocked by a stranger possessing such intimate knowledge of some of Morgaine's grosser pecadillos.

Morgaine's clean-shaven, rugged face wore a look of barely concealed

irritation. "Now, Mr. Small, is it? What brings you here today? Something about *Secret Sutras*, my assistant said."

Riley poured out the whole story. Morgaine listened without comment. Riley dared to hope he had finally found a believer in the strange fate that had overtaken him. But Morgaine's subsequent speech shattered that last illusion.

"Mr. Small, rest assured that my client Sally Strumpet will pursue all her legal options against anyone who contests her authorship of her book. To put it bluntly, the full weight of the law will come down on you like a circus tent full of elephant dung. Why you wannabe writers feel compelled to fantasize like this about celebrities — "

Riley fled in mid-bluster, something he had often wanted to do with Morgaine but had never before dared.

Being a non-entity had its liberating moments.

Googling Sally's homepage at the library's public-access terminal, Riley learned that her next bookstore appearance in Manhattan was tomorrow, at the very Union Square store where he had first been inspired to write *Secret Sutras*.

Low on cash, dubious of the validity of his credit cards, Riley spent the night on a bench in the park behind the library.

He was at the store several hours before Sally's slated signing, looking like a half-drowned sailor. He killed time at the café on one of the upper floors, nursing a coffee and muffin. Half an hour in advance of the signing, Riley had positioned himself unobtrusively near the table stacked high with copies of *Secret Sutras*, so that he could see without being seen. When Sally entered, Riley was relieved to note that she seemed to be unaccompanied by any flunkies.

Sally read from chapter four and her reading was, as usual, flawless, and she fielded the usual audience questions gracefully. Afterward, she took her seat behind the table set up with mountains of her book. Her book! The line for autographs already stretched across the store and out the door. Had Riley been in Sally's seat, he would have been more annoyed than pleased at the immense turnout, contemplating all the inane small talk he would have to make, the dumb misprisioned praise he would have to listen to, and the pains his wrist would endure. But Sally, to the contrary, seemed all earnest sunshine and good will, gratitude and flirtatiousness.

Why oh why had he made her so damn noble?

She must have sold and signed two hundred books. Riley could feel the painful extraction of every cent of royalties that should have gone into his pocket, every leaking ounce of karma that should have been his. No wonder he was turning invisible.

After a fulsome round of congratulations from the elated, sales-inebriated store manager, when Sally finally seemed ready to leave, Riley trailed her out.

He accosted her half a block away, when she stopped to hail a taxi.

"Hey, you bitch! I want my life back!"

Sally turned and coolly regarded Riley from her superior height. Her gorgeous face seemed to sear itself onto his cortex, the place where it had first formed.

"You ran out on me," Sally said. "That was not appreciated. Don't you remember my seventh sutra? 'A woman's wounded heart is like a wounded lion. You'd better pray it never recovers its health and gets nosing on your trail.'"

Suddenly Riley's consciousness inverted and projected itself through space. He seemed to be regarding himself with Sally's eyes, gauging himself with Sally's emotions. The father became the brainchild fully for the first time. Realization of the existential obligations he had placed on Sally by creating her crashed over him like a tsunami. Flop sweat soaked his clothes. He felt like God on trial at some cosmic Hague courtroom.

A few seconds later, Riley was back in his own head. But all the fight had gone out of him, leaving him as stinkingly droopy as a bartender's rag.

"You're right. I'm a rat. So I'm leaving again now, but this time I'll say good-bye to your face. Good-bye."

Sally smirked victoriously, but not without a margin of charity. "Oh, so you want to make the same mistake twice? Not exactly a quick learner."

Riley halted. "What do you mean?"

"Why not ask me if I want you back?"

"Do you?"

"Sure. Weren't we created for each other?"

Riley could practically hear cosmic theme music swelling in the background. He knew then that just as he had created Sally, Someone Up

There had created him, devised this fate for him, and that both Riley and Sally were equal in the eyes of this irony-fixated deity.

"I can't deny it," Riley said. "But are you really willing to give me a second chance after I ditched you and cheated on you?"

"I might be. If I heard the three little words every gal is truly longing to hear."

Riley felt the requested phrase surface almost involuntarily from his diaphragm and get stuck halfway up his throat. He didn't want to utter it. For one thing, he wasn't sure of what he felt. For another, he resented being coerced. But declaiming his passion seemed the only way to get his life back.

"I — I love you, Sally."

Sally grinned like a cat with a mouse's tail hanging from its jaws. "There, that wasn't so hard, was it? Although you used four, arguably five words instead of three. Tsk, tsk, not economical for a writer of your talents. Now c'mon, here's a cab. We've got to get you cleaned up and looking handsome for the dinner tonight with Sonny Mehta."

Riley numbly tumbled after Sally into the taxi, and the car drove off. Churning, confused thoughts about his future revolved through his head. But one thing he knew for sure.

There was another book waiting inside his brain. A book just as powerful as that which had created Sally Strumpet. A book of harsher, more tragic sutras.

And any character could die in a sequel.

Anyone.





Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

William Gibson: No Maps for These Territories, by Mark Neale, Docurama, 2001, $24.95, DVD.

Neuromancer, by William Gibson, Ace Books, 2004, $25.

HAS IT really been twenty years since *Neuromancer* was first published as an Ace paperback original? What's perhaps more surprising is how fresh the story still feels — considering that the book is somewhat of a near-future thriller, and with all the other novels it has — let's be polite and say — inspired.

Yes, there are gaps in Gibson's future — who can imagine our present world without cell phones? — but Gibson was never trying to be prescient. As can be seen in the many novels and short stories that have appeared since *Neuromancer*'s critical and popular success first dragged him into celebrity status, he has always been more concerned with story and character and investigating the Zen moment of now where the two collide and take on a life of their own.

Much has been made of Gibson's lack of technological know-how when he wrote the book (on a typewriter), but it just goes to show you that while research will always be an indispensable tool, imagination still remains the most vital component of good storytelling. Imagining story, the inner workings of his characters' minds, and the world in which it all takes place are all more important than research in the long run.

And while Gibson might not have been a computer geek himself, his coining of the term "cyberspace" — and perhaps more importantly, the use to which he put the term in the novel — inspired countless men and women who *were* computer savvy to try to bring his vision to life. As Jack Womack says in his afterword to this new edition, and rephrases on the DVD (which we'll

get to in a moment), these folks "set about searching for any way the gold of imagination might be transmuted into silicon reality."

Without the inspiration of Gibson's work to spark the imaginations of these programmers, the world as we have it today might well be a different place. But the book was published, and as Womack goes on to say, we now, "thanks to all those beautiful William Gibson readers out there in the dark, have the actual Web — same difference [as cyberspace], for all intents and purposes, or it will be soon enough."

The documentary film *No Maps for These Territories* provides a perfect companion to the novel. (The DVD was apparently released in 2001, but only recently came to my attention.) I can't do better than the back cover copy to describe the setup:

"On an overcast morning in 1999, William Gibson...stepped into a limousine and set off on a road trip around North America. The limo was rigged with digital cameras, a computer, a television, a stereo and a cell phone. Generated entirely by this four-wheeled media machine, *No Maps for These Territories* is both an account of Gibson's life and work and a commentary on the world outside the car windows. [He] offers a unique perspective on Western culture at the edge of the new millennium, and in the throes of convulsive, tech-driven change."

Just as *Neuromancer* seems to stand outside of time, the documentary's focus on the last year of the century doesn't date the film either. It remains relevant and thought-provoking, from start to finish.

The film begins with a barrage of images and dislocated sounds that immediately reminded me of the novel — a rapid-fire collage of input that tells us this is something outside of our normal lives. But while the background remains busy throughout most of the duration, one never gets the sense of the director being arty for art's sake, because he's smart enough to keep Gibson central to it all: visually on screen, and with his voice.

I was almost halfway through the documentary before I realized what it was about *Neuromancer* and Gibson's other work that drew me in from the moment of its first publication (me being a reader who still leans much further to the fantasy side of the genre than the sf). Gibson's settings might seem dystopic, but the underpinning is one of hope. This was brought home

to me in the film when he says, "The heart is the master and the head is the servant, and this is always the case, except when it isn't...and when it isn't, we're in deep, deep trouble. And we *are* in deep, deep trouble."

Which seems as relevant now as when he said it back in 1999. Perhaps more so, because every year we seem to depend more and more upon the intellectual solution, even when it goes against what we know in our hearts to be true. I'm not saying we should become instinctual creatures, following whatever whim or fancy happens to come our way. I just wish we could temper our intellectual reasonings with some compassion.

"This," Gibson says of our lives, "is not a rehearsal. This is what's real."

We should take that seriously.

And if all sounds too touchy-feely for you, with the perfect wry tone that often inhabits his speech, Gibson adds, "All the fridge magnets of the new age have a certain kernel of truth in them."

If you have yet to read *Neuromancer*, this edition, with a new foreword by Gibson and a truly fascinating afterword by Jack Womack, is as good a place as any to start. (For one thing, you'll discover how, if Gibson hadn't grown up in Appalachia, *Neuromancer* would have been a very different book.)

And whether you have or haven't read the novel, I recommend the film highly. Gibson's insights into the creative process and the world we live in are meaningful, at times humorous, and certainly provocative.

It will probably send you to the book as a first-time reader, or want to reread it, as happened to me.

If your local DVD store can't get you a copy of the film, it's readily available from: *www.docurama.com*.

The Winter Oak, by James A. Hetley, Ace Books, 2004, $14.

A word of a warning: don't start this without having first read Hetley's earlier novel, *The Summer Country*, because Hetley drops you right into the middle of a story that's already in progress — which is not a bad thing. It certainly beats those tiresome prologues one gets in too many fantasies. But without the knowledge of that earlier book, you'll miss a lot of the character resonances, not to mention being left wondering what the heck is going on here.

But if you're forearmed with a

knowledge of *The Summer Country*, this new book will prove to be a rich and rewarding experience.

Now go away and read the first book before venturing any further into this review.

You're back? Good.

So it turns out that the sorceress Fiona, so ably defeated by Maureen Pierce in the first book, is getting ready for a second round. It's obvious to her that Maureen's sparing her life was a show of weakness and she means to play on it. Maureen has also made the mistake — in Fiona's eyes — of freeing all the slaves of the previous castle's lord, leaving her and the castle defenseless.

But what becomes fascinating — and perhaps a life lesson we can take away from the book — is how Maureen's apparent weaknesses are her greatest strength. I won't say more.

Also getting on-stage time is Maureen's new love, Brian Albion, facing treachery in the order of Pendragon knights of which he is a member; Maureen's sister Jo whose struggle with the demons of her past ends up bringing her back to the Summer Country; Jo's lover David, poet and reluctant warrior; and Khe'sha, mate of the dragon David killed in the first book, who is trying to juggle his need for revenge with his responsibility to their offspring, who will die without his close supervision.

They're not quite Thomas Covenants (who, incidentally, has returned in Stephen Donaldson's new novel, *The Runes of the Earth*), but their lives are certainly a mess. At times it makes for painful reading, and the stakes are certainly high with crises arising in both the Summer Country and the native Maine of most of the characters.

How they fare — if they even survive — you'll have to find out for yourselves. But I will say that the promise Hetley showed in the first book blossoms fully in this sequel.

Comic Book Encyclopedia, by Ron Goulart, HarperCollins, 2004, $49.95.

Comics have long been the Rodney Dangerfield of literature. They get no respect — never mind the blockbuster success of films based on comic books like *Spider-Man*, or the fact that a graphic novel (*Maus*) won a Pulitzer Prize. Even those who should know better apparently don't. When Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess won a World Fantasy Award for an issue of *Sandman*

(which at the time was more innovative and a better read than ninety percent of the fantasy available in prose form), rumor has it that the board of the convention changed the rules of the award system to ensure that it wouldn't happen again.

Unfortunately, *Comic Book Encyclopedia* isn't going to change that general perspective the world has of this form of storytelling. The lurid cover and interior illustrations assault the eyes with garish pop colors that would do Andy Warhol proud, depicting superheroes and an inordinate number of well-endowed women in skimpy outfits. Any soul new to the form is simply going to take one look at the illustrations and decide that this really is just cheap entertainment, appealing to the masses.

But a closer look shows us that the women from *Strangers in Paradise* (about as atypical a comic book as one might find) share the cover along with the more expected images of Spider-Man and the X-Men, as well as Hellboy (who made it, one assumes, because of the recent success of his film, or why wouldn't more iconic characters such as Superman or Batman be there?).

And you know what? The book is *fun*, full of all sorts of useless but entertaining information. For instance, did you know that the maiden name of Blondie Bumstead was Boopadoop?

Author Ron Goulart proves to have an exhaustive supply of information and trivia about comic books ranging from when the field first began to the present day. Comic book lovers will get a real kick out of the book, checking out their favorites and delving into the history of the field. But unless one has a fondness for pop art (of which there is plenty), I doubt it will appeal to anyone outside the field. And it won't convince anyone who isn't already an aficionado that this is a viable medium deserving of respect.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.





Books

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

Edenborn, by Nick Sagan, Putnam, 2004, $19.95.

Cloud Atlas, by David Mitchell, Random House, 2004, $14.95.

Air, by Geoff Ryman, St. Martin's Griffin, 2004, $14.95.

TRADITION has it that, at various points in the yearly cycle, and most especially at Halloween, the border between the lands of the living and the dead grows thin and porous, and for a time the denizens of each world may cross over and mingle with the dwellers in the other. It seems to me that something similar occurs along the border between "mainstream" fiction and the territory of the sf and fantasy genres. The ghetto gates open, the membrane thins, and for a while the separate worlds accept and even invite the intrusions of the other.

Such a time was the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the New Wave set out explicitly to adopt the narrative techniques and aspirations of non-genre writing, while millions of readers far from the usual sf circles embraced Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Herbert's *Dune*, and Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. And such a time may be upon us again, as Susanna Clarke's intricate historical fantasy *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* is published with fanfare to the non-genre market, and Philip Roth rides an alternate history novel to the top of the bestseller lists and widespread acclaim. Meanwhile, some of sf's quirkier writers (such as Jonathan Lethem and Karen Joy Fowler) have enjoyed comparable success with their ventures into mainstream territory, and the two worlds mingle shamelessly in novels such as Audey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife* (a Today Show Book Club selection, no less), wherein a science-fictional premise illuminates a moving contemporary love story.

For years, publishers have taken the occasional sf novel that might be particularly accessible to non-genre readers and billed it as a "futuristic" or "near-future" thriller to avoid the sf stigma, and that's what happened with Nick Sagan's first two novels, *Idlewild* (2003) and now *Edenborn*. They've been published under the Putnam name, not the house sf imprint Ace, and their covers avoid obvious genre signals in favor of more impressionistic images (*Edenborn* sports an angry red cell that calls to mind *The Hot Zone*). The strategy seems to have worked — *Idlewild* picked up favorable reviews in *Entertainment Weekly* and *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Edenborn* scored space in *The New York Times Book Review*, outside of the usual sf column.

Behind the packaging, however, Sagan's novels are competent though not particularly original takes on familiar sf scenarios. *Idlewild* gave us an amnesiac adolescent who discovers he's living in a world of immersive virtual reality (IVR) created to raise him and the handful of other kids he knows because the world has been wiped out by a disease called the Black Ep. *Edenborn* picks up the story eighteen years later, with the kids grown up and responding to their predicament as last people on Earth in various ways. Some are dead, some are missing, but three of them have used their IVR-honed skills to restart some cloning and genetic engineering equipment in an attempt to repopulate the planet. One of them, Isaac, disagrees with the other two on a fundamental principle: He believes they should bring back unmodified humans and use the technology to find a cure for Black Ep, while the others think they should engineer their "children" to create people immune to the disease, even if the changes produce a species that's no longer strictly human.

Sagan's got a knack for keeping the pages turning, but he leaves the intriguing issues and possibilities of the post-apocalypse scenario largely undeveloped in favor of the self-indulgent preoccupations of his characters (in particular Penny, one of the "posthuman" girls, around whom the plot comes to turn). Few of these characters are especially interesting or even convincing, except for Haji, one of Isaac's unmodified children. Isaac has raised his kids in his Sufi Islamic faith, and Haji's youthful struggle to discern the will of God in the plague-haunted world is not only

endearing and poignant, but constitutes the most unusual element in *Edenborn*. It's rare to find sympathetic treatments of religious faith in sf, and these days even rarer to find Islam portrayed anywhere as anything but a jihadist's delusion. Haji's presence elevates what is otherwise a moderately entertaining but thoroughly derivative book.

It's this derivative quality, however, that makes Sagan's novels such good candidates for the non-genre audience. (Sagan's cinematic pacing and style — he's written for television shows such as *Star Trek: Voyager* — don't hurt, either.) There are a couple of generations now that have been steeped in the basics of sf through film and TV, *Star Trek* and *The Terminator* and *Outbreak* and *The Day After Tomorrow*. A post-apocalyptic Earth has become as viable and unchallenging a setting as 1960s Topeka for the familiar diet of self-involved adolescent angst and melodrama.

David Mitchell's third novel, *Cloud Atlas*, was reviewed in the same issue of *The New York Times Book Review* as Sagan's *Edenborn*, but otherwise it occupies an entirely different region of the literary landscape. Mitchell has been something of a darling of the hip lit world since the appearance of his first novel, *Ghostwritten* (2000), particularly in Britain, where all three of his novels to date have been shortlisted for the Man Booker prize. He's been justly celebrated for his narrative ventriloquism, inventive structures, and undisguised yet unimposing ambition. Mitchell isn't afraid to take risks, and he makes use of whatever literary techniques and traditions suit his purposes — including the devices of sf.

Ghostwritten featured nine distinct but intertwined first-person narratives — a Japanese doomsday cultist, a Hong Kong lawyer, a Russian art thief, a radio talk-show host, even a disembodied intelligence migrating through Mongolia — each story adding layers of coincidental and metaphorical interconnection to create an evocative though tenuous unity. *Cloud Atlas* uses a similar structure, a sequence of six stories with even more widely varying narrators and techniques, to produce an intriguing, elusive sense of wholeness. Mitchell opens with the journal of Adam Ewing, a California notary on the return journey from the South Seas to San Francisco in 1850, but his story breaks off literally in mid-sentence, and the novel jumps to the 1930s with

the correspondence of an aspiring composer and disinherited wastrel, Robert Frobisher, as he works his way into the good graces of one of his aging musical heroes. Again Mitchell cuts the story off midway, and jumps ahead to the 1970s with a kind of political thriller told in choppy cinematic mini-scenes, and thence to the memoir of an aging British vanity publisher trapped in an old-age home. From there we enter sf waters, with the interview-confession of Sonmi-451, a rebellious clone in a corporation-dominated Korea of the near future, and finally to the story of Zachry, a member of one of the few remaining pockets of semi-civilization in a post-collapse, further-future Hawaii. Zachry's story proceeds start to finish, and then each of the five abbreviated strands resume in reverse order, like a bit of recursive computer code working its way back up with a result.

Mitchell's unconventional narrative structures may invite comparison to Nabokov, Cortázar, Pynchon — or, in the sf field, Gene Wolfe — but beyond the unconventionality and self-referentiality, Mitchell's work isn't quite a match for any of those. He lacks Nabokov's eccentric vision, Cortázar's density of construction, Pynchon's hallucinogenic prose style, and Wolfe's subtlety. Taken by themselves, each of the stories that make up *Cloud Atlas* are utterly, even slavishly, conventional — Ewing's journal a perfect pastiche of the period style, Frobisher's letters a model of epistolary narrative, even the sf sections proceeding along familiar lines. Nevertheless, *Cloud Atlas* enchants with the constant surprise of Mitchell's virtuosity as he shifts from voice to voice and mode to mode, and with his refreshing brio, an unrestrained passion for storytelling rarely equaled in contemporary fiction, inside or outside the genre. One can hardly resist getting caught up in the energy of Mitchell's performance. And, as in *Ghostwritten*, the whole amounts to more than the sum of its parts. A sense of unity emerges from the repetition of images, metaphors, and coincidences — an almost metaphysical awareness of the interconnectedness and interdependence of things, of the vast incomprehensible flow of history which we can only glimpse in the form of discrete narratives that inevitably obscure the larger truth of the whole.

What's striking about *Cloud Atlas*, from the point of view of a genre sf reader, is that the two sf

sections are in fact the most emotionally affecting parts of the book. Though Mitchell can be a little clumsy in his genre mechanics — we might accept that computers in Sonmi's Korea could come to be known generically as "sonys," but it's hardly possible that photographs will be called "kodaks" — he takes the sf scenarios at least as seriously as he does the others. The sf sections are the only ones which could conceivably stand alone as independent stories. The other four narratives certainly have all the parts, and they're interesting enough in the context of the novel, but they're not substantial enough to be read by themselves. It's not difficult, however, to imagine the tales of Sonmi and Zachry (though they don't exactly break new ground) appearing on their own in the pages of this very magazine.

More striking still, the sf sections perform a crucial function in Mitchell's scheme. He's not dabbling in sf on a lark — he needs it to achieve his goals. Without the perspective of the future, Mitchell could not have conjured the sense of universal interconnectedness that emerges by the end of the book, and without the inventive freedom sf allows, Mitchell could not have produced some of his most evocative parallels. In Zachry's story, for instance, there's a clear echo of the account in Ewing's journal of the fate of the peaceful and more civilized Moriori at the hands of the warlike Maori. The parallel closes the historical and thematic circle. The use of sf in *Cloud Atlas* may herald a more permanent and fruitful extrusion of genre devices into the broader literary toolkit.

Toward the end of *Cloud Atlas*, the composer Frobisher describes the work he has just completed — "Cloud Atlas Sextet," which he hopes will be his masterpiece — in terms that clearly echo Mitchell's own scheme: "In the first set, each solo is interrupted by its successor: in the second, each interruption is recontinued, in order." And he wonders, "Revolutionary or gimmicky?" For all its pleasures, *Cloud Atlas* falls short of revolutionary, but it is much more than mere gimmick. Mitchell's obvious ambition encourages us to expect our minds and hearts to be shaken and remade by the end of the novel, and they are not, but *Cloud Atlas* gives us reason to believe that Mitchell, with his talent and inventiveness and willingness to adopt any mode or voice that furthers his ends, may one day present us with a monument of enduring genius.

* * *

Geoff Ryman has defied categorization for more than a decade — ever since he followed up his award-winning sf novel *The Child Garden* (1989 UK, 1990 US) with a widely acclaimed non-genre novel, *Was* (1992), which imagined the tragic life of a Dorothy Gael who never went to Oz. The print version of Ryman's experimental online "novel" *253* (1998) won the Philip K. Dick Award despite its merely tangential relationship to sf. Ryman returned to the clearly fantastical with *Lust* (2001 UK, 2003 US), the story of a British scientist who discovers that he has the power to make his every sexual fantasy come true. By that point, however, Ryman was widely recognized as a non-genre writer (*Publishers Weekly* even called *Lust* "his third novel," completely ignoring his sf work), and *Lust* was published as a non-genre book, a "fable for the modern age."

Ryman's latest novel, *Air* (the first chapter of which *did* appear in the pages of this very magazine, under the title "Have Not Have"), is just as straightforwardly science-fictional as *Lust*, and yet almost as likely to appeal to readers beyond the usual reaches of the genre. The tiny village of Kizuldah, in the fictional Central Asian country of Karzistan, has remained mostly unchanged through the centuries, remote among the mountains, but in the year 2020 Kizuldah becomes the last village in the world to get connected to the Internet — and, shortly thereafter, it experiences the test run of a revolutionary new communications technology, Air, which promises to connect everyone, everywhere, through a kind of pervasive field. No wires, no implants, and no escape — Air will cover the entire world at once.

Chung Mae is the village dressmaker and "fashion expert," as well as one of its chief sources of information about the outside world (which she brings back from her occasional trips to the larger town of Yeshibozkent). When the Air test comes, the elderly Mrs. Tung is visiting Mae, and the sudden appearance of images and voices in the old, blind woman's head confuses her to the point that she blunders into Mae's boiling washpot. Mae, reeling in confusion as well, cannot help her friend, and as the Air test ends, Mrs. Tung dies. But in her efforts to help Mrs. Tung, Mae established a connection with her through the Air, and she is left with Mrs. Tung's memories living in her head like a ghost — and with a

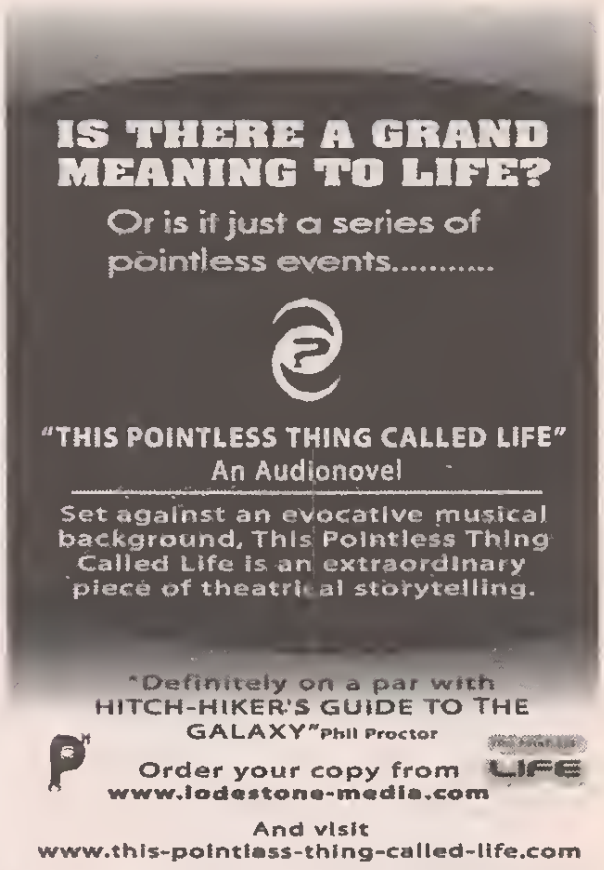
vision of how utterly Air will change life in the village.

Ryman renders the village and people of Kizuldah with such humane insight and sympathy that we experience the novel almost like the Air it describes: It's around us and in us, more real than real, and it leaves us changed as surely as Mae's contact with Air changes her. Kizuldah seems less like an imaginary place we've read about than a place we've visited, perhaps even lived. Some of Ryman's characters exist more vividly in our minds than our own neighbors.

Such an achievement would be enough to carry any novel, even without the sf device that drives the plot. But that device and the plot it generates provide the perfect platform for Ryman's incisive meditation on the process of social and cultural change. Air is that change, sweeping the world irresistibly, penetrating even places like Kizuldah. It's the disruptive effect that decisions made in wealthy, powerful nations inevitably have on poorer, weaker ones. It's the way new technologies alter not merely the external world, but our inner selves as well. It's how the future erases the past.

Ryman gives us many heartbreakingly elegiac passages that evoke the agony of watching the past die. When a man from the government comes to Kizuldah, sent to encourage the far-flung villages to prepare for Air, he discovers that Mae has already compiled a raft of information about the preparedness of the village by interviewing her neighbors. "What did you find out?" he asks her, and she replies, "That the village has died.... I mean our children will become like children everywhere else. They will play computer games and learn everything and the very last of the old ways will go. Absolutely everything we know and love will go."

But, as in *The Child Garden*,



Ryman takes a more complex and ambivalent view of change than these passages alone suggest. He recognizes the tremendous losses that change brings, and the grief that those losses cause, but he resists simplistic nostalgia. He balances his elegies with equally beautiful observations on the wisdom and necessity of acceptance. After the government man leaves, old Mrs. Tung's voice tells Mae, "Of course you are in mourning.... We all want an anchor, we all want to turn the corner to go home. But home always goes away. Home leaves us. And we get older and then older again, and farther away from home." Not much later, using Mae's voice, she tells the village schoolteacher, "There has always been one big change after another. But we always think our first world was permanent.... Your world came just after the Russians drove out the Chinese. Before you were born, the Eloi were fighting a war against the Chinese.... There is no old world to go back to, Shen. My brightest little boy, are you still too young to see that?"

And Ryman carries this ambivalence even further. Change is not only inevitable, it may even be good. Despite all the damage and suffering it occasions, it may also bring about a better world than the one it destroys. Toward the end of the novel, in another instance of perfect metaphor, a flash flood inundates Kizuldah. In the aftermath, Mae broadcasts a kind of eulogy for the village to one of the friends she's made on the net: She describes the devastation, the homes destroyed, the missing neighbors, her own house half-collapsed. And she also describes the temporary lake that all the water has created in the valley. "But look at the beautiful new sea. Look at it sparkle. Look at how full of hope it seems; look, it has seagulls, who could hate such a beautiful sea? Even if it covers houses — houses where you played as children — even if dear friends are trapped inside, their mouths full of mud. Even landscapes die, and give birth to new ones."

This amazing balance that Ryman maintains — mourning change while embracing it — renders *Air* not merely powerful, thought-provoking, and profoundly moving, but indispensable. It's a map of our world, written in the imaginary terrain of Karzistan. It's a guide for all of us, who will endure change, mourn our losses, and must find a way to love the new sea that swamps our houses, if we are not to grow bitter and small and afraid.

A Web search of this author's name is likely to yield various genealogies and scientific articles that cite Hobson's Choice, so let us help the cause by pointing you to www.demimonde.com. *Scrutiny of that site will inform you that M. K. Hobson lives in Oregon with her husband and daughter and works for a marketing agency in Portland. Her short fiction has appeared in* SCI FICTION, Vestal Review, *and* After Hours, *and she is currently working on a novel. She has also published nonfiction in various venues, including an early piece with the eyebrow-raising title of "Bingo, the Game of Death." Her* F&SF *debut is a stylish story of haves and have-nots, with perhaps some concern over who's who.*

Domovoi

By M. K. Hobson

"YOU'RE A MURDERER AND a rapist, and there may be no hope for you," Winnie says to Ryan on a rainy afternoon at the end of the story. "But if there is, I will find it. I will remake you."

Ryan doesn't reply. He didn't know he was a murderer and a rapist until very recently, so there is nothing to say. Nothing except the obvious words: *It was only because I loved you,* but Winnie would probably respond to that by breaking his arm, so he does not say it.

Instead, he stares at the rain dripping through a broken place in the roof. They are in an old warehouse down by the river, a place he bought yesterday. He paid for it with a check from his leather-covered checkbook, probably the last one they will let him write.

After buying the building, Ryan took the bucket of ashes out of the trunk of his green Lexus. With a shaking hand, he scattered them everywhere, over the floors, the walls, the windowsills. The ash rose up in great billowing clouds, choking him, mingling with his tears to make a gritty paste that he licked off his lips.

And now, after everything, he and Winnie are both stretched out on a stained mattress that they found by the back door, drinking from a bottle of vodka with a torn label. She looks just as she did when he first met her, immense ass and too-tight tank-top and all. Gone are the gray silk suit, the perfect teeth, the vacant stare. Now she just is what she is, nothing more or less. She has won.

This is where the story ends, but it is not where it begins.

The story begins on Ryan Ceres's fortieth birthday.

Ryan Ceres's birthday is the fortieth anniversary of what has been, and promises to continue to be, a perfect life.

He is a real-estate developer. He drives a green Lexus and he listens to adult contemporary rock. His fingernails are manicured and his hair is the color of fresh honey. His eyes are as blue as the sun shining through ice.

He is celebrating the anniversary of his birth with his fiancée, a slender redhead in a gray silk suit. They are having dinner at a restaurant on the top floor of the tallest building in town. His fiancée is staring down at a salad that is composed of two delicate leaves of arugula, a lump of herb-crusted goat cheese and a garnet-colored curl of shaved beet. She is heartbreakingly beautiful in a thoroughly banal way.

Ryan, however, has long since ceased to notice what she looks like. He is staring past her, out the tall black windows at the city below. Like jewels set in rich fabric, his buildings glow up at him. They beam up at him adoringly. They love him and he loves them. They are his real dinner partners. They are the ones with whom he is sharing his birthday dinner.

He raises his wineglass to the window, blowing them silent imaginary kisses.

At twenty, with a substantial endowment from a bachelor uncle who foresaw greatness in his young nephew's cobalt blue eyes, Ryan started with old houses. Victorians, bungalows, foursquares, modernes; he fed on plaster dust and linseed oil. When he turned thirty, he went looking for a larger challenge and found it in the red-and-gold heart of Chinatown; the Gorham hotel, built in 1911. Eighty rooms of drunks and addicts. A wreck, a noble heap, a disaster with possibilities. He brought in his men, brutally

efficient Russian laborers, and set them to work tearing the place apart.

In one room they found hundreds of empty methadone bottles wedged under a floorboard, and hundreds of old hypodermics quivering in the ceiling above, flung like the pencils of schoolchildren, a garden of upside-down glass flowers. In another room, a room that smelled of mothballs and old-man liniment, dozens of dust-crumbling girlie magazines had been stuffed behind the wall. Stuffed there to block a draft? To avoid embarrassment? It didn't matter. His Russians burned them with all the rest of the mouldering yellow insulation. They stripped away rotting lath and horsehair plaster and put in smooth fresh drywall and expensive bamboo flooring, and when they were finished, the Gorham Hotel featured eighty ultramodern studios with brushed metal refrigerators and cultured marble cooking islands. Only the best.

It made him his first million, a million that has expanded and contracted many times since, expanding with capital inflows, contracting to meet expenses, expanding and contracting, like a great beating heart, pushing new blood through old buildings.

The old bank that he turned into lawyer's offices. The old department store that he turned into a mini-mall. The old brewery that he turned into a brewpub. And, most recently, the old flour mill, reclaimed from the dull-eyed clowder of Hispanic squatters living in her labyrinthine basements, that he turned into twenty thousand square feet of quaint little shops selling arugula, herb-crusted goat cheese, and organic beets. The proprietors of these little shops will make good money. Ryan will make nothing. His net profit on the deal is a satisfyingly round figure. Zero.

Each building he takes on is a little bigger, each rehab a little more lovingly detailed, each project a little less profitable. There is a delicious purity in this that he relishes. It is not the money he desires. The money is nothing, only a tool to purchase goat cheese and arugula for the empty-eyed cypher sitting across the table from him. The real satisfaction comes from the knowledge that he has made his buildings clean and pure, burned the filth of ages from their bones, scoured them of the unseen impurities time breeds. He has uncovered chimneys full of dead birds; the skeleton of a cat wedged between two wall studs; decaying piles of rat shit in ancient ventilation ducts. He has exposed obscene secrets and expunged them.

Quite suddenly, Ryan feels extremely pleased with himself. An erotic charge of satisfaction surges through his body. He looks lustfully at his fiancée, somewhat surprised to find that she is still there.

Her hair shines, her face is perfect, her nails gleam, her skin is smooth as glass. The relationship between her and the curl of beet she is contemplating is entirely without entropy, a universe which has long since ceased to expand. She is as self-contained as an egg.

The electricity charging his nerves dissipates abruptly, and his sudden elation is replaced by an equally sudden feeling of irritation. He puts down his fork heavily. The sound of silver on porcelain makes her look up.

"Why would they put a curl of beet on the salad?" she sneers melodiously. "No one likes beets."

"Some people obviously do," he says, flashing her one of his sandpaper grins designed to smooth out rough patches. He's perfected these grins, he uses them often. It helps to grin, he's noticed, even when you feel like tearing someone's throat out.

Life has apparently taught her the same lesson. A polite, fleeting smile dances across her lips, replaced quickly by a pretty little frown as she returns to her contemplation of the despised curl of beet.

It is Ryan's fortieth birthday.

He gives his fiancée a good-night peck and doesn't wait for the elevator doors to slide shut before he turns and walks away. His fiancée must be in bed by 11 P.M. precisely, for she must be at the gym early the next morning to exorcise any fatty demons the arugula and goat cheese may have introduced into her pure corpus. She is utterly composed of routine and habit; if she is not in bed by 11 P.M. precisely, she might start breaking things. The moment his lips leave the cold flesh of her cheek, he ceases to think about her. She ceases to exist.

He goes back into the restaurant, to its clean elegant bar filled with fresh-looking young people. The counter is made of zinc and there are cobalt-blue vases with yellow gerbera daisies in them. He sits, drinking steadily, the zinc cooling his elbows.

He thinks about his Russians, his agents of efficiency and order, who are currently working on a project for another developer. He misses them. They just wrapped the flour mill project a week ago, and already he misses

them. He misses their sharp staccato conversations, their sublingual grunts, their smell of oniony sweat. They are remaking an old generic family chain restaurant (orange and brown) into a new generic family-chain restaurant (brown and orange). He contemplates going out to the job site the next day and visiting them. But the idea depresses him. The building they are working on has no life, no spark. He longs for the thrill of performing surgery on a kicking patient, not slogging through the dissection of a corpse.

Depressed, he leaves the restaurant, its zinc bar and gerbera daisies, and rides the elevator down to the street. The valet brings his green Lexus and he turns on the adult contemporary rock. Loud.

It doesn't help.

LATER, LYING on a dirty mattress and drinking vodka from a bottle, Ryan will dream of this night. He will dream of the wind rushing through his hair like warm fingers, of the ceaseless rhythm of crickets blowing past, of the smell of leather seats covered with dew. For this is the night that he finds her.

You will remake me, he whispers into her lap.

But that is later.

This night, he drives through the town, tapping a finger against his steering wheel, chewing on the inside of his cheek. He drives past many of his buildings, hoping that one will call out to him, invite him back, but none of them do. So he drives into an ugly part of town, a dangerous part of town, a part of town that wasn't safe or savory even during its best years.

He drives until pink and gold dawn fingers the hills, until he begins to think that he should go somewhere, to an actual destination. To his fiancée's home. She has bleached-oak floors in her entryway. She will serve him herbal tea with a shortbread cookie.

He takes a left. He will drive back and find the freeway.

Then his breath catches.

She rises and spreads before him, white stone walls stark in the peach-colored dawn. Along her sides, thousands of tiny windows wink at him in the rising light. Some are broken; these stare at him, black and insane.

She is surrounded by tall weeds. Over the front door, the words

"Windsor Machine Works" are spelled out in thin steel letters, stark and streamlined, lush with the tragedy of a brilliant, aborted future.

Below those letters, there are larger ones, painted on a warped sign nailed across her front door. The sign is old and battered, pocked with birdshot and curlicued with graffiti. But he can still read what it says.

It says, FOR SALE.

He parks slantways, jumps out of his car. He walks the cyclone fence surrounding until he finds a beaten-down place; he tears the leg of his slacks climbing over it, carves an ugly gouge in his calf. No matter.

She is made of white limestone as supple and smooth as a virgin's thighs. Her black twisting ironwork is crisp and devilish. The crumpled yellow newspapers crouching at her feet are supplicants satisfied by the simple blessing of her shadow; the glittering shards of broken glass bottles are like jewels, carelessly discarded.

He climbs onto a low crumbling wall beneath one of the windows. He presses his nose to the grimy glass like a child hoping to see elephants.

Inside, the building is a vast emptiness of square iron pillars and cement, thousands upon thousands of square feet of space. On the concrete floor, stagnant puddles glimmer, rainbowed with oil, reticulated with webs of settled dust. There are bolts in the cement where huge machines once anchored, straining against their own torque.

He stands, his cheek pressed up against the glass, closing his eyes. He imagines walls hiding unimaginable decay, steel beams crumbling to dust, tinder-dry insulation chambered with mouse nests, wires wrapped in fraying cloth. He can feel the sunlight as it pounds into her.

He's in love. Again.

He buys the Windsor Machine Works building that day. A birthday present for himself. It surprises the gals down at the County Assessor's office to see Ryan Ceres camped on their doorstep when they open the doors. He is unshaven and there are shiny purple hollows under his eyes.

The gals in the County Assessor's office tell Ryan that if the building is for sale, they can't figure out who's selling it; no one has paid taxes on it since 1963. It seems, in fact, to have no owner at all.

This greatly puzzles the gals, for they cannot conceive of such an odd

thing. It is an offense to their unimaginative natures to think that anything can escape taxation for that long. They chatter about it amongst themselves as they prepare the paperwork.

Stop talking, he imagines screaming at them. *Her secrets are not yours, they are mine, mine, mine....*

He blinks, realizes that the gals are staring at him. They are staring at him so hard he wonders suddenly if he's said something aloud that he didn't mean to. He wipes a hand across his brow, flashes them his sandpaper smile. They wouldn't understand.

Pulling out his leather-covered checkbook (which they understand completely), Ryan writes a check for the entire amount of back taxes, and just like that, the building is his.

As he's driving back across town, he is joyful. He is in a state of transcendent bliss. The day is perfect blue, and he has the top down and his sunglasses on. The warm wind is snaking through his hair. Adult contemporary rock blasts out of his speakers. This moment is the absolute peak of his life.

A sudden thought strikes him. He flips open his tiny titanium phone and presses it to his ear. He calls Jose (Jose is his locksmith, always on the move) and arranges to meet him at the building. Arrangements made, Ryan flips his phone closed and taps the steering wheel in time to a Céline Dion song.

When Ryan arrives back at the Windsor Machine Works, Jose is already there, bending over the open trunk of his always-breaking-down Justy. Jose is sorting through picks and tension tools and extractors. Choosing his implements carefully.

Ryan is flooded with inexplicable anger. The thought of another man sniffing around her doorstep enrages him. What if he'd decided to tamper with her before Ryan had got there? What if he'd decided to put his unkind picks into her unwilling locks?

"How long have you been here?" Ryan asks casually.

"Just got here," Jose tosses off. "'Bout to leave, though. Bad neighborhood. They shoot you for nothing around here."

Ryan imagines punching him in the nose.

Jose doesn't speak as he makes the key. When he is finished, he fits the bright new thing into the old door, and turns. The door swings open,

releasing a smell of ancient oil and something else, strange and indefinable, like steel shavings rusting in honey.

"What the hell are you thinking, man?" Jose says. He stands with his hands on his hips, squinting into the gloom. He shakes his head as if trying to shake off raindrops of impending doom. "This place will finish you."

Ryan snatches the key away from him with a growl.

"Get out," Ryan says. "Get the fuck out."

He does not watch or wave good-bye as the Justy clatters away.

He walks past the front desk, pushes open a creaking door, and he is on the manufacturing floor. The gals at the County Assessor's office say that their oldest records indicate that this building was used to manufacture machine parts during the First World War.

That whole area was really hopping during the war, one of the gals had said. Ryan imagines women in hobble-skirts, men in baggy canvas twill trousers, paunchy old managers in vests with watch-chains looped from button to pocket. All gone now.

The manufacturing floor smells like stale urine and pigeon shit. As Ryan walks through the wide door and into the building, the space swells around him, the filtered light through the dust-caked windows cool and blue, the cement floor vast and undulating like a calm body of water.

His footsteps echo. On the floor there is a pile of repair manuals from the '30s for a machine of indecipherable purpose. The manuals look as if they've been stored in a bucket of old oil. Blackberry vines thread through broken windowpanes. The iron pillars are cobwebbed with ribbons of rust.

He thinks about the dump trucks and caterpillar tractors that will soon line up outside. He thinks about how the weeds will be cut away and the rusted pillars pulled down, and the oil-slicked concrete cleaned with foaming buckets of trisodium phosphate. He thinks about multi-use dwellings, white space, windows. He thinks about how everything dirty will be made clean, antiseptic, new, smooth. He closes his eyes and spreads his arms and imagines himself expanding, expanding.

At the back of the room is a set of stairs. He moves over to them carefully, avoiding the puddles and piles of grimy debris. In the rafters overhead, he hears baby pigeons squeaking weakly, and the sound of wings.

The staircase is a jury-rigged affair. Ryan mounts the stairs, carefully feeling each board for soundness.

He stops after a few steps, looks back. The door is still open and the warm afternoon sunlight is inviting him back, calling him to come out. But it is hot out there, and in here it is cool. He notices the smell again, the strange smell of honey and steel. He looks up the stairs. At the top there is a hollow-core plywood door with a jagged-edged hole in the center. He imagines rotting construction, thin-walled offices, and empty filing cabinets. It is dark at the top of the stairs.

He keeps climbing.

The door opens onto a hallway, its linseed linoleum flooring warped and curled. Four doors open off the hallway, two on either side. He opens the first door. There is an office beyond, nothing in it but a mouse's nest and some chewed-on newspapers.

He looks in the second office. It has a heavy metal desk in it. There is a window that looks over the factory floor, but it is covered with plywood.

There is a woman in the third office.

Ryan jumps when he sees her, slamming back against the door with a rattling thud. She is sitting with her back against the wall, staring up at the ceiling as if expecting it to do something. There is a look on her face, a look that is both empty and full, like she is thinking very deep thoughts about nothing.

"Jesus," he whispers, his heart pounding in his throat. "Who the hell are you?"

She drops her oil-colored eyes and looks at him, not blinking. She is, Ryan notices, as far from beautiful as a woman can get. She is shaped like a bell; her ass is immense, her waist lumpy, her shoulders strangely narrow. Her breasts poke out through her too-tight tank-top, and they're small and hard and probably sour, like unripe persimmons. Her arms are thick with muscle.

"Winnie," she says, lifting a hand. In it, there is a bottle of vodka. She takes a swig of this and holds the bottle toward him.

Squatter, he thinks, with a mixture of disgust and glee. The first secret to be stripped, the first boil to be lanced. He knows how to deal with squatters.

"You're going to have to leave." His voice is firm and unshaking, full of money.

"No," she says.

"I've bought this place. It's mine now."

Winnie does not move, but stares at him, a grim little smile playing over her lips.

"Yours, eh?" she says.

Ryan thinks about going for the police. But it is hot out there, burning and dry, and in here it is cool. So instead of leaving, he does something stupid. Something he knows he should not do. He reaches out and grabs the strange woman's arms, tries to pull her to her feet. He halfway succeeds before she wrenches herself backward, pulling him off balance and sending him tumbling to the dirty floor.

She moves quickly, coming up over him. With a balled fist, she punches down viciously, catching his chin. He puts up his arms, shields his face. The world is a confusion of movement and pain as she hits him. Her fists find his softest spots, unerringly, hard. He closes his eyes.

"Yours, eh?" she shrieks again and again, until her voice finally retreats down a dark tunnel.

He wakes up choking.

The woman is pouring vodka down his throat.

He gags, shoving her hand aside. He is lying on the floor. He wants to jump up, but he cannot; he is stiff and sore. He can barely move. She is sitting next to him, legs stretched out before her. In her hand, she has a long heavy piece of wood that looks like it came out of a ruined place in the wall. She is tapping the wood gently against her knee.

He looks at her lap, stretched out beside him. It is vast, doughy, clad in worn-thin sweatpants. He tentatively reaches over a hand to touch it. It is warm, like pudding encased in a heating blanket. Winnie says nothing, but takes a drink of the vodka. Then she hands it to him. He takes his hand off her leg and takes the bottle, drinking from it delicately. She offers him a cigarette. He doesn't smoke. But he watches as she puts one in her mouth, lights it carefully, exhales the smoke in a thin stream.

"Why are you here?" Winnie asks.

"This place is mine now," Ryan says, his voice uncertain. "I bought it."

"You bought it." She says the words flatly, a statement, not a question. She seems to find them humorous, but she does not smile; instead, she flares her nostrils. "Why?"

"To...to clean it. To make it new."

"What if it doesn't want to be?"

Ryan blinks at her, as lost as one of the gals at the Assessor's office.

"What are you talking about?"

"What if it just wants to be what it is? What it has become?"

This makes Ryan laugh, a loud barking laugh that echoes through the empty building.

Winnie snarls, her lip curling. She lifts the wood, brings it down hard.

He curls his arms around his head again, and again the world retreats in darkness.

WHEN HE WAKES UP, she is gone and he is alone. He limps down the stairs and out of the building, down to where his green Lexus is waiting. It is night, a thick hot summer night. Where did the whole day go? He has the most horrific hangover he's ever experienced, and he aches terribly. Running his tongue over his lip, he can tell that it's split. Touching fingers to his eyes, he can tell that they're blackened.

When he gets to his green Lexus he looks at his reflection in the rear-view mirror. It's worse than he thought. There's a red welting crease over his cheekbone, and both his eyes are as purple and blue as overripe plums.

First, he uses his cell phone to call the police. He tells them about the crazy squatter in his building. He wants her cleared out. He is a man of substance, goddamn it! He has pumped millions into the local economy over the past decade. He is on a first-name basis with the mayor.

Yes, he is willing to press charges for assault. He wants her locked up for life. Maybe in an insane asylum.

Satisfied, he flips his phone shut. Then he drives to his fiancée's condominium. She is wearing green silk pajamas, and she looks as smooth and beautiful as fresh plaster. She looks at him blankly, without interest, without surprise, without anything. She does not even comment on his battered face. In a flash of blackness, he shoves her to the ground and

makes passionate, unpleasant love to her on the bleached oak floor of her entry hall.

Then, sitting naked on her distressed leather couch, her black portable phone pressed to his ear, he calls every contractor he knows. The most brutal, the most efficient, the most pragmatic, the most no-nonsense.

He makes appointments, sketches timelines, makes plans.

The first month, they clean.

Contractors tear out the old offices where Ryan was beaten, commenting on the drops of dried blood and the smell of spilt vodka.

The police find no squatter. They search the place thoroughly, come quickly to the conclusion that she has "moved on," and happily wash their hands of the whole thing. Ryan, however, is not satisfied with this sanguine pronouncement. In fact, every now and again, Ryan is sure he sees Winnie's lumpy figure out of the corner of his eye, rushing at him, the wood in her hand raised high. Her eyes are lit with hatred and anger.

But she is never really there, and the police can't arrest someone they can't see.

Ryan's brutal and efficient men start to call him "twitchy," for he is always involuntarily dodging blows.

After a month, the building is completely gutted and structural work can begin. It is then that Winnie really does reappear. Ryan is alone in a room one afternoon, looking at plans, when he smells honey and steel, sweet and fleeting.

He looks up, alarmed, expecting to see her bearing down on him with the wood. But she's just standing, looking at him, her arms crossed behind her back. She seems to have lost weight. Her ass is smaller and her legs seem skinnier. Her skin seems smoother.

He regards her for a while, assessing danger. She's still and solid and sullen. He flashes her a sandpaper grin.

"You're back?" he says.

"Never left," she says. "Never will leave. Never."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," Ryan says. "The police...."

"The police won't find me," she says, looking at him. She looks paler,

he notices. Slightly sick. There is a strange shimmer about her, as if he can see her bones superimposed upon her flesh, a luminous ghost-skeleton that moves as she moves. He blinks, trying to clear this odd vision from his eyes.

"What gives you the right?" she asks, softly. "What gives you the right to do this?"

His brow curdles. It is an insane question.

"I own this building," he says slowly, reducing each word to inarguable finality.

"That is not an answer," she says.

"What other answer is there?" Ryan blazes, sudden frustration firing him. He wants her to shut up, to do what she is told.

Winnie is silent for a few moments. She is standing at a place where a wall used to be. The wall is gone, only structural timbers remain. She stretches out a hand, strokes her fingers through the air that the wall used to occupy. He can see every bone in her hand set in angular contrast against the timbers and studs and beams. The stark intersecting lines are indescribably beautiful.

"I do not want to be what you want to make me," she says.

Ryan says nothing, watches her stroke the ghost-wall. The moment of adoration passes, giving way to critical dissatisfaction. Her movements are crisp, clumsy, machinelike. Inelegant, he thinks. She needs curves, smooth clean curves that please the eye. He makes a mental note to work with the architect on some streamlined walls for the entrance.

"You have no right," she gasps, and he realizes that she is crying. "You have no right to change something that does not want to be changed."

He takes a step forward, then another, like an unwise park visitor approaching a seemingly tame bear. He reaches out a hand, and touches her face.

"There now," he says, stroking her cheek. Her skin is smoother, he notices with satisfaction. "There now."

Winnie reaches into her pocket for a cigarette. Her hand is trembling.

"No smoking," Ryan says gently, prying the cigarette from between her fingers. With a ferocious snarl, she slaps his hand away. He jumps back, his heart thudding. A surprisingly pleasant thrill surges through him.

"It's for your own good," he adds, holding fists defensively before his chest, expecting her to rush him.

"Liar," she spits at him, and in the time it takes him to blink she is gone.

Problems arise, one after another. Expensive problems. Seismic upgrades. Asbestos removal. Hazardous waste disposal from where old puddles of oil have polluted the ground.

It is easy to take out the first construction loan; Ryan's bankers love him. They even love him enough to give him a second. But the third one is difficult. They shuffle their wingtips and cast glances back and forth. It is clear that they share some of Jose's concerns.

We're unclear on your vision here, Mr. Ceres.

The freeway's a dozen blocks away.

To call the neighborhood transitional is being generous....

The infrastructure's marginal...no retail component anywhere nearby....

Ryan bullies them and gets the third loan, but there will not be another. It should be enough. That, added to some liquidated longer-term investments...his broker will squeal that the money is for his future, but Ryan doesn't care. She is his future.

The contractors finish the framing. The smell of fresh pine is one of the best smells Ryan knows. It's the same smell that disinfectants have, and Ryan always associates new framing with cleanliness. Old ugly hidden things, invisible squirming vermin being scorched away, burned away, sterilized.

One of Ryan's brutally efficient Russian workers, a framer, is named Sergei. He leaves behind a plate of bread and salt one night, which Ryan stumbles over. Ryan swears roughly at Sergei; while the Russian is much bigger than he is, it's always good to look tough to one's people.

"What the hell is this?" Ryan picks up the plate of bread and salt and shakes it in the big man's face. "We got the rats cleared out of here months ago, you want them back?"

"This will not attract rats," Sergei shrugs. "She will not let it."

"She?" Ryan looks at him. "Who?"

"The building," Sergei says. "The *domovoi*." Seeing that Ryan does

not understand, Sergei gently takes the plate of bread and salt from him and puts it down carefully. "The *domovoi* is the spirit of the building. Its soul. This building's soul is sad and in pain. I thought to comfort her."

"Comfort her?" Ryan clenches his teeth, remembering Winnie bearing down on him with the wood. "I'm not paying you to comfort the goddamn building." He kicks at the plate of bread and salt, sending it scattering across the plywood flooring.

Sergei shrugs, and turns to go. Ryan calls after him:

"Can they be killed?"

Sergei turns slowly, looks at him through narrowed eyes.

"Killed?" he says.

"Yes," Ryan says curtly. "Killed. Eradicated. Exorcised."

"I have heard that they can be moved," Sergei says thoughtfully. "By carrying hearth coals to a new home. If the *domovoi* likes it there...."

"I didn't say *moved*," Ryan interrupts him sharply. "I said killed. Can they be killed?"

Sergei shrugs, looks around at the clean-smelling new pine framing.

"I suppose this is the way to do it," he says.

Winnie does not show herself again until month four.

The contractors are putting in bamboo flooring and installing energy-efficient double-paned glass windows. The money is running thin, but Ryan will not cut corners. He runs up bills that he knows he will not pay. This does not concern him in the least.

Visitors from the bank begin showing up at the worksite, at odd hours of the day. Taking notes.

Ryan is in a room that will become the master bedroom of the most expensive loft, eight thousand square feet of exposed concrete and thick hewn beams. The room is large and airy, with wiring for a ceiling fan and arched windows that look out over the street. He's looking down at the street, his hands clasped behind his back. On the street, there's a man leaning against a blue camaro, selling drugs.

"Please stop." The words come from behind him. He turns slowly.

She looks much thinner now, her face sleek and shining. Her hair is smoothed back from a soft, placid face. She's wearing a suit of gray silk. He looks her up and down, approvingly.

"It hurts," she says. "Please stop."

"I'm too far along now," he says. The words make her wince visibly.

A vague premonition of worry crosses his mind. What is the pain in his chest, what is the ineffable regret? He doesn't understand it; he dismisses it with a curt gesture of his hand.

"You're just afraid of change," he says, more harshly than he intends to.

"It hurts," Winnie says again.

"Good things sometimes hurt," Ryan says, careful to make his tone soft. He wants her to understand, he wants her to stop fighting. He wants her to let him have her, to give him access and permission. "Medicine hurts. It hurts, but it heals."

"You are not healing me, you are killing me," she whispers. "I don't know what I am anymore."

"It doesn't matter," he says. "I know what you are."

"I hate you," she whispers, tears gleaming slick in her oil-colored eyes.

Ryan smiles down at her sadly. She doesn't hate him. He knows it, just knows it. She doesn't hate him. She can't hate him.

"You hate the idea of changing," he says. "You hate the idea of being changed. You hate the idea of letting someone else help you."

"I never asked for your help," Winnie says.

"But you did. By decaying, by getting old, by letting yourself fall to ruin," Ryan strokes her hair. "But I will make it better. I will take care of you."

"It hurts," Winnie says finally, and then she's gone, and Ryan's arms encircle nothing.

After six months, the renovation is complete. The Windsor Machine Works rehab is finished. It is clean, sterile, perfect. There are no secrets left.

Every item on the punch list has been checked off, and the Russians have been paid, even if there are other bills that never will be.

There are five vast condo lofts on the top floor, each with a prime view of the surrounding neighborhood. The ramshackle houses that haven't been painted in years, the rusting cars in their driveways and side-yards,

the drug dealers and prostitutes in their blue Camaros. Who said there wasn't a viable retail component?

Ryan has had a dozen calls from the real-estate agency he usually uses to broker his properties. They're trying to back out. They want nothing to do with marketing this one. He enjoys listening to the voicemails, how they get progressively screechier.

There is fifteen thousand square feet of retail space on the ground floor, lease ready. The blonde wood floors and cool white lighting are perfect for the Starbucks and the Gap and the Old Navy that will never come.

Ryan takes one last walk through the building, but he does not enjoy it. He feels so strange. The familiar joy, the pride and feeling of completion, the post-orgasmic relaxation of tense energy pleasantly spent, is nowhere to be felt. Instead he feels keyed up, anxious and annoyed. Frustrated. Stifled. Twitchy.

He comes into the room where he last saw Winnie. This is the display model; it has been decorated so that perky sales agents can inspire prospective residents with visions of the kind of life their exorbitantly high mortgage can purchase for them. The walls have been painted a soothing shade of mint green. There is a comfortable arrangement of camel-colored suede furniture in one corner. One chair is draped with a fuzzy, avocado-hued chenille throw. Ryan tries to imagine getting comfortable in this room. He can't. The thought gives him a headache.

There is also a large white bed, a cast-iron four-poster looped with gauze that (Ryan knows from experience) will have to be washed every goddamn week to keep from getting dusty. More meaningless garniture. More curls of shaved beet. He imagines making love to his fiancée in that bed, in that engulfing marshmallow-soft nest. Imagines her yielding body, her blank eyes staring up at him.

What is wrong with him? He presses his fingers to the bridge of his nose. These things sell. These are what people want. Why should they annoy him so? Why does he suddenly long for the smell of motor oil and rust and honey?

"Winnie!" he whispers loudly, looking wildly about the room. "Winnie, for God's sake!"

Then, she is there. Sitting on the bed.

The transformation is complete. She is slender and sylphlike, with a delicate face and vacant eyes.

She looks, Ryan notices with sudden horror, exactly like his fiancée.

She is staring out the window, thinking unfathomable thoughts. Her hair shines, her face is perfect, her nails gleam, her skin is smooth as glass. She is perfect and perfectly self-contained.

"You know something strange?" she says distantly, her face wrinkling in a pretty frown. "It doesn't hurt anymore."

That night, Ryan burns it down.

Burns it all down; the bamboo flooring, the soothing mint-green walls, the new plaster. Everything. He storms through the dark virgin rooms with a five-gallon gasoline can. He lights the fire by putting a ripped piece of rag into the mouth of a bottle of vodka. Then he stands across the street and watches her burn, brilliant greens and oranges, deep mysterious flickers of blue, black billowing smoke that makes the sky weep.

He sits across the street, watching the fire trucks cluster around like busy insects. Dawn breaks, the sun rises, and no one notices him, no one knows who he is; he is just another man, sitting silently, watching something go up in flames.

He waits until the firemen have gone, leaving behind nothing but yellow tape and the smell of death and her gray, hulking, empty skeleton, charred and angular.

Crawling through the yellow tape, sneaking like an animal, he moves around at her feet, through her hot shadow. With a shaking hand, he fills a galvanized bucket with damp gray ash. There are pieces of wood mixed in with it; wood like bone.

He places both hands on the side of the bucket, closing his eyes. There is a warmth banked within, the warmth of pudding encased in a heating blanket, the warmth of rage and retribution and desire.

"Come with me," he whispers, pleading. "Stay with me. Please."

He puts the bucket into the trunk of his green Lexus.

He visits the gals at the County Assessor's office. They are surprised again, because he smells like smoke and his face is streaked with ash and

tears. But they take his check gladly and issue him a receipt with a formal red stamp on it.

And so he reclines with Winnie in the warehouse by the river. In the rain. On a stained mattress, drinking vodka from a bottle with a torn label.

Ryan's appraising gaze shifts to the brick wall instinctively, out of habit. Once painted glossy white, now it's grimy, smudged with old black handprints. How many layers of paint hide beneath there?

I should strip that paint, he thinks. *Expose the brick. People like exposed brick.*

As soon as the thought crosses his mind, pain sears through him, tearing his heart into little throbbing bits. He gasps for air.

"The secrets *stay*," Winnie growls.

Ryan presses both palms flat against the sides of his head, as if he can press the pain out his ears.

"How did you...," he begins.

"You breathed in the ash when you were scattering it," Winnie says, taking a drink from the vodka bottle. There is a long silence while she lets Ryan absorb the implications of what she has said. Then she looks at him with cool, unblinking, oil-colored eyes.

"You're a murderer and a rapist," she says again.

How could he not have seen it? It is a secret he kept from himself, only now brought into the light to be scoured away.

With a shaking hand, Ryan takes the bottle of vodka from her. He takes a long harsh swallow. He's forty, rich and beautiful, and the ghosts of his victims will live within him for the rest of his life.

He lays his head on her soft, warm lap.

"You will remake me," he says, closing his eyes. He will sleep. He will sleep for a long time. He will dream her dreams. He will remember what he never knew. He will savor the exquisite beauty of acceptance.

He feels her hand upon his head. She smoothes his hair carefully.

"There may be hope for you," she says very softly, her voice sweet as honey.



When last we saw Harry Challenge, back in our May 2003 issue, we mentioned that Mr. Goulart was at work on his Comic Book Encyclopedia. *That book has now been published, as you already know if you read Charles de Lint's column in this issue. But did you know that Mr. Goulart's book on the adventure comic strips,* The Adventurous Decade, *is being reissued soon! And we'd be remiss if we neglected to mention that Mr. Goulart's latest mystery novel,* Groucho Marx, King of the Jungle, *is slated for publication this July.*

But enough about Groucho already—we want Harry. And here he is, investigating another gaslit supernatural mystery.

The Secret of the Scarab

By Ron Goulart

THE PORTLY MAGICIAN, frowning, abruptly stopped talking. Leaving the rigid blonde young woman in the flowing white gown floating just five feet above the stage, he hurried over to the gas-lit footlights. Pointing up at a shadowy box seat with his ivory-tipped wand, the Great Lorenzo shouted, "Harry, my boy, you're about to head into great danger. Be certain to see me after the show."

He adjusted his top hat and returned to the floating lady. "As I was saying," he resumed, "I acquired the power of levitation well over a decade ago while studying with certain obscure holy men in a remote and especially mystical region of far-off India. Now, my dear, be so kind as to continue your heavenward journey."

The magician made a few circular motions with the wand. The robust blonde rose, slowly, upward until she achieved an altitude of about ten feet. There was a large flash of yellow lightning and she vanished entirely.

The Great Lorenzo's crimson-lined cape swirled outward as he bowed toward the audience in the London theater.

As he straightened up, smiling broadly, the several hundred enthusiastic patrons applauded.

Harry Challenge skirted the huge gilded cabinet that Lorenzo used in his Famous Oriental Escape Illusion and made his way through the backstage area toward the door of his friend's dressing room.

He was a lean, clean-shaven man of thirty-three, a bit above average height. He wore, since his father felt it helped the image of their agency, a conservative dark business suit and a bowler hat. He also wore a shoulder holster containing a .38 revolver.

Harry was an American private inquiry agent who now and then handled an occult case. It was late in May of 1899 and he was spending a few days in London prior to heading to Ruritania to consult with a client who suspected that his recently inherited castle contained a ghost.

The star attached to Lorenzo's door was large and lopsided, looking as though it had been cut out of a sheet of yellow wrapping paper and glued there. Someone had penciled the word Great over the typed name Lorenzo on the small name card.

"Come in, Harry," called the magician after Harry knocked.

He entered, grinning. "You've changed the act," he said, settling into the listing Morris chair. "Yelling at me isn't usually part of it."

The heavyset man was studying his face in the mirror at his dressing table, making certain he'd removed every trace of stage makeup. "That was an authentic warning, my boy, not a diversion for my adoring audience."

"You knew I'd drop in after the show," Harry reminded, taking one of his thin cigars out of his case. "There was no need to — "

"As you are aware, Harry, I am, pure and simple, an illusionist," Lorenzo told him as he turned his chair to sit facing him. "However, now and then I am visited with what I deem a true premonition, a vision of what's to come. Some of them have in the past, as you may recall, helped you to avoid serious trouble."

"Yep, that's true," agreed Harry, lighting his cigar with a wax match. "So I take it you've had another glimpse into my possible future?"

The magician fluffed his ample sideburns, nodding. "Exactly. It occurred while I was involved in elevating Olivia."

"Isn't her name Delphine?"

"This is an entirely different blonde, Harry, and one that is a good fifteen pounds heavier than the departed Delphine."

"It's a good thing, then, that you learned levitation in India," observed Harry, exhaling smoke. "What sort of premonition about me did you have?"

The Great Lorenzo sighed. "Just as I was about to send Olivia onward and upward, I experienced severe pains in my chest and stomach," he explained. "A sure sign of either indigestion or an oncoming vision. Seconds later, I beheld a very clear and sharp picture of you. I was exceedingly disturbed, because...."

"Because what?"

In a lowered voice Lorenzo answered, "You were dead."

Harry leaned forward. "Details?"

"As you know, Harry, some of my peeks into tomorrow are partially symbolic," he said. "At any rate, my boy, I saw you quite clearly lying dead in an ornate Egyptian mummy case. There were several Egyptian artifacts in the background, and plunged into your heart was a wicked-looking dagger with a great golden beetle engraved on its hilt."

Harry took a thoughtful puff of his stogie. "That's it?"

The Great Lorenzo nodded. "I was so unnerved that I interrupted my act to warn you at once."

"So what exactly should I be avoiding, Lorenzo? Trips to Egypt? Sleeping in mummy cases? What?"

Frowning, the plump magician answered, "Surely you're working on a case here in London? Something involving Egyptology perhaps. It occurred to me that you were investigating what the newspapers have been referring to as 'The Curse of King Ibis the Second's Tomb.'"

"Yellow journalism."

"Two of the men who opened the tomb in the Valley of the Jackals in 1896 have been murdered and robbed within the past three weeks," amplified the magician. "You weren't hired to investigate this matter, my boy? After all, curses are something you've had considerable experience — "

"I am simply spending a few days in London before I catch a boat train and then sail to Ruritania," said Harry, grinning. "Fellow who inherited a castle near Zenda suspects he may be haunted."

The magician's frown deepened. "This is most odd, Harry, since I seldom get all the details wrong in one of my.... Ah, perhaps this is it." He nodded at the closed door to his dressing room.

Someone knocked politely.

"Come in, my dear," he invited.

The erstwhile floating blonde, wearing a checked flannel robe, entered. There was a cablegram envelope in her hand. "This was just delivered at the stage door for Mr. Challenge. Good evening, Mr. Challenge, I'm Olivia Claybrook."

He accepted the cablegram. "Thanks, Miss Claybrook."

She glanced at the magician. "Are we still having a late supper, Lorenzo?"

"Quite probably." He made a shooing motion.

She moved to the doorway. "I was most pleased to meet you, Mr. Challenge," she said and exited.

Harry opened the message.

It read:

DEAR SON: INSTEAD OF STAGGERING AROUND LONDON WITH THAT DISSOLUTE MAGICIAN, GET TO WORK. SIR LIONEL DANVERS WANTS YOU TO INVESTIGATE A POSSIBLE CURSE. SEE HIM TONIGHT AT 11 P.M. AT THE LONDON MUSEUM OF EGYPTOLOGY. HE'S FILTHY RICH AND THIS MEANS A LARGE FEE FOR THE AGENCY. YOUR LOVING FATHER, THE CHALLENGE INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE AGENCY.

Taking a couple puffs on his cigar, Harry handed the cablegram to the magician.

After reading it, Lorenzo said, "Ah, as I foretold, Egyptian trappings. Are you going to accept the case?"

"Sure."

"I'd accompany you to the museum, since it's only a short walk from Piccadilly Circus here," he said apologetically, "but, as you know, I promised to dine with the fair Olivia. Later in the evening, I tentatively suggested to a local duchess that I might — "

"That's okay, Lorenzo." Harry consulted his pocket watch, then stood up. "Now that I'm forewarned, I won't get into any mummy cases or let anyone get near me with a golden dagger."

The magician rose up. "I'm serious, Harry," he said. "You must be very careful."

"That's one of my policies," Harry assured his friend.

They didn't have daggers.

The three large hooded men who came charging out of the thick night fog were armed with clubs.

Harry judged he was less than a half block from the London Museum of Egyptology when the figures materialized from out of the chill mist.

"Stay away from the bloody museum, Challenge," suggested the first lout as he swung his gnarled cudgel at Harry's head.

Dodging the blow, Harry dived to his left. His shoulder slammed hard against a high wrought-iron fence that blossomed out of the gray fog.

The impact knocked off Harry's bowler hat.

A second assailant lunged toward him, brandishing a stout bludgeon.

Yanking his pistol out, Harry fired at the wide man.

The slug hit the man in the thigh. He howled, causing his dark silken hood to billow out. He went stumbling backward and was swallowed by the fog.

Standing wide-legged and alert, revolver in hand, Harry watched the surrounding mist. He couldn't spot either of the other two thugs.

Then suddenly a rough scarf was jerked around his neck from behind. As it tightened, he began to choke, making harsh hacking sounds in his throat.

Harry tried to fire his gun back over his shoulder to hit the strangler. But then a club came swinging out of the mist to swat his gun hand.

The .38 fell to the pavement. He didn't seem to be able to take in any air at all, was growing dizzy, started seeing zigzag bursts of fuzzy-colored light in the thick night fog.

"That's quite enough of that, you rowdies," commanded a young feminine voice. "Begone."

Two pistol shots followed.

Harry heard someone cry, "You'll regret this, Zuleika." He passed out.

As Harry gradually returned to awareness, he had the initial impression that a baboon was chastising him. In critical, and somewhat nasal tones, the three-foot high creature was saying, "...highly, one might say

extremely, disappointed in the manner of your advent, Challenge. I mean to say, one of our guards noticed you staggering up the steps of the museum in a state that can only be classified as extreme drunkenness. No sooner had he admitted you than you passed out completely, nearly damaging an exhibit case of rare polychrome unguent vessels. Your conduct thus far, I need hardly point out, fails to add anything in the way of luster to the reputation of the Challenge International Detective Agency."

"Whoa now," said Harry in a fuzzy, croaking voice. He coughed twice, tried again to speak. "I'm not drunk. I always stagger after somebody tries to garrote me."

His vision had been clearing and he was now able to discern that the baboon was a life-size quartzite statue resting atop a refectory table near the armchair in which he had awakened.

"A rather feeble explanation," remarked the small almost bald man behind the desk facing Harry. He was pale and thin, about sixty years of age, wearing a rumpled Norfolk jacket. "I am relying on you, after all, to investigate a most puzzling case, involving as it does murder and the possibility that an ancient Egyptian curse is being fulfilled. If you're not up to remaining in control of your faculties, Challenge, perhaps the museum had best contact the Pinkerton agency or perhaps Burns or some other — "

"C'mon, Professor Danvers," cut in Harry, "you know damned well that Pinkerton or Burns can't tackle anything that smacks of the supernatural. In fact, Burns would hide under his desk if anybody so much as mentioned an Egyptian curse to him." By pushing on the arms of the fat green chair, he got, wobbling some, to his feet. "However, if you're going to be a stubborn, pigheaded — "

"Sit down, old man," suggested Danvers. "Perhaps I've been a bit offensive. It is, I am told, an unfortunate habit of mine. I'm well aware of the excellent reputation of your father's detective agency in matters of this — "

"We're equal partners," corrected Harry, settling back into the chair.

"Of course, forgive me." Leaving his chair, Danvers moved toward a small claw-footed table that held a bottle of wine and four glasses. "Might I offer you a glass of sherry? I find it helps clear one's head after any — "

"Nope."

The professor's office was large, lit by two hanging lamps and shadowy around the edges. It was oak-paneled and rich with wall cases that held Egyptian artifacts such as alabaster chalices, gold amulets, pendants of gold and turquoise, Canopic jars, and scarabs. Leaning against a wall was a gold-overlaid wooden coffin lid taken from a tomb.

After Professor Danvers poured himself a glass of sherry, he returned to his desk. "Now to the business at hand," he said after sipping his wine.

"It involves a curse?"

"That I am not altogether certain of, old man," said the Egyptologist. "Which is one reason why I sought the help of the Challenge International Detective Agency. As you may be aware, I was one of those leading an expedition to Egypt four years ago."

"I'm aware of that, yeah," said Harry. "You and your colleagues discovered the tomb of King Ibis the Second in the Valley of the Jackals. There was supposedly a curse that threatened anyone who defiled the tomb."

Danvers nodded. "That's a common factor associated with such excavations," he said. "We thought little or nothing of it at the time. However, just a month ago, one of the six leaders of the Ibis the Second expedition was killed in a most gruesome manner. That was poor Sir Rodlow Coddington, who was found brutally stabbed in his town house in Bloomsbury — quite near to our museum. The motive, Scotland Yard decided, was burglary, since quite a few valuable pieces from the tomb of Ibis the Second were stolen."

"How come Sir Rodlow had stuff like that around the house?" asked Harry. "Weren't you fellows obliged to turn everything over to the museum here, since they financed the excavation?"

"We had a special agreement, which allowed all six of us to split up a small percentage of the findings."

"Was there something specific in what he had that burglars might've been after? Or were they simply gathering loot?"

Danvers hesitated, sipped his sherry. Shaking his head, he answered, "No specific item, to the best of my knowledge."

"Sir Rodlow isn't the only one of the six who's died," said Challenge quietly.

Sighing, the professor said, "Only two weeks since Malcolm Tubridy, at seventy-four the oldest of our group, was bludgeoned to death at his country estate in Somerset near the village of Dowlish Wake. Again mostly artifacts from the tomb of Ibis the Second were stolen."

"What's Scotland Yard say about the second killing?"

"They believe, in both instances, that they're dealing with a gang of art thieves, Challenge," he answered. "As you may know, some of the more sensation-minded London newspapers have already suggested that the curse is to blame for the two deaths thus far. For myself, I am not at all certain." He stood up again. "I would, I assure you, very much like to prevent further deaths — whatever their cause."

Harry took out his cigar case, extracted one of the thin cigars he favored but did not light it. "I want names of the remaining members of your party and their addresses."

From beneath an alabaster vase, Danvers slid a sheet of bond paper. "Here are the three others besides myself."

"All of them reside in or near London," said Challenge after studying the list. "Does Scotland Yard have men watching all of you?"

The professor replied, "They have not taken me into their confidence, Challenge. Nor am I certain that they believe that the rest of us are in danger."

"I'll talk to somebody I know at Scotland Yard and see what precautions they're taking," said the detective. "I can contact a local agency we work with and have them keep an eye on you fellows if need be." He opened the cigar case again, put the stogie away. "You don't actually believe there's a curse, do you?"

"Frankly, I do not completely accept the notion," admitted Professor Danvers. "Still, I'd like someone with your occult experience to make absolutely certain."

"Outside of theft, what other reason can you think of for somebody murdering your friends?"

"I don't know, Challenge," said Danvers. "That's why I'm paying the Challenge agency a nearly outrageous fee to find out exactly what's afoot here."

Harry folded the list of names twice, slipped it into the breast pocket of his coat. "Do you know anyone named Zuleika?"

Danvers frowned, eyes narrowing. "My wife, sir, happens to be named Zuleika."

"No, I was thinking of a younger woman who might — "

"My second wife is considerably younger than I am," he said evenly. "Why, may I ask, are you — "

"Nothing important." He stood up. "Who did you tell you were hiring me?"

"Only my colleagues from the expedition."

"Not your wife?"

"Certainly, since I believe in sharing my concerns with my wife. Are you implying that — "

"I'm implying that somebody knew I was coming to call on you tonight." He moved toward the oaken door of the office. "Somebody who apparently wanted to discourage me from working on this case."

"Yes, that hadn't occurred to me earlier," he admitted. "I am, alas, at a loss to account for it."

"That's one more thing I'll have to find out." Harry grinned, very briefly, and took his leave of the professor and the museum.

THE LARGE POISONOUS SNAKE had apparently grown restless. It came slithering out from under the four-poster canopy bed just after Harry tugged on his night shirt. It didn't wait until he was in bed and asleep to attempt an attack.

Executing what was, considering the circumstances and the amount of massive furniture crowded into his second floor hotel room, a very graceful back flip, Harry put a greater distance between himself and the serpent.

From atop the heavy mahogany bureau he grabbed his .38 revolver and, half-turning, fired at the snake.

He missed and, producing an annoyed hiss, the reptile slithered closer.

"Let's do better this time," Harry urged himself, firing again.

This time he successfully decapitated the snake.

"I say," shouted the tenant of the room next to his, "it's a bit late for that sort of thing, don't you think, old man?"

Shrugging, Harry kept his pistol gripped in his hand and approached the remnants of the snake. "Looks like an imported viper," he decided. "That indicates that somebody resourceful has taken an interest in doing me in."

He was contemplating the dead creature when the balcony window snapped open, the heavy brocaded drapes flapped and fog came spilling in from the chill night outside.

Harry pivoted, his revolver aimed at the window.

"I have reason to believe, Mr. Challenge," announced the handsome young woman who stepped in off the balcony, "that another attempt will be made on your life this evening."

"In addition to the snake?"

She glanced down in the direction he was pointing with the barrel of his gun. "Ah, that's the snake I was anticipating," she said. "If my hansom cab hadn't been overturned after a collision with a beer wagon, I'd have been here a good quarter of an hour ago." She nodded her approval. "You're apparently more competent than I had reason to believe."

Harry refrained from mentioning that it had taken him two shots to dispatch the damned snake. After returning the gun to the bureau top, he put on a robe. "Why exactly are you trying to be my bodyguard, Mrs. Danvers?"

She pursed her lips. "So you're aware of my identity. I suppose," said Zuleika Danvers, "that's because you're a detective."

Harry seated himself in one of the bedroom's several fat Morris chairs. "I heard your voice when you shot at that trio of louts near the museum," he told her. "I heard those would-be assassins call you Zuleika and later your husband mentioned your name. How come those guys know you?"

Zuleika was a tall handsome woman in her late twenties. Blonde, with a Burne-Jones look, she was wearing riding breeches, boots, and a heavy mariner's sweater. "That's another reason why I wished to talk to you," she said, sitting down on a candy-striped love seat.

Finding a thin cheroot in the pocket of his robe, Harry lit it. "You know more than your husband does about these murders," he suggested, exhaling smoke.

"You ought not to smoke, Mr. Challenge," said Zuleika. "Not only is it an offensive habit, but it undoubtedly affects your health."

He ground out his cigar in a stoneware ashtray. "The murders?"

The handsome young woman looked directly at him, her hazel eyes bright. "My husband is a highly intelligent man, much respected in the field of Egyptology," she began. "He is also, regrettably, nearly sixty years of age and far from his prime."

"So, ma'am, this involves a younger fellow?"

Lowering her head, Zuleika sighed. "I fear that it does," she admitted. "Although I was not aware of it when I began the affair, he is one of the most dangerous men in London. I would list him third, close on the heels of Professor Moriarty and then Dr. Grimshaw, in the ranks of criminal masterminds. Once I learned his true nature, I severed the relationship."

"His name?"

In a lowered voice she answered, "Ambrose Winward, who passes himself off as a decadent illustrator in the manner of Aubrey Beardsley. In actuality he is a practitioner of the black arts as well as a thief and a murderer."

"And you didn't know this when you took up with the guy?"

"Alas, no. Have you heard of him?"

"Rumors only," answered Harry. "He heads a secret organization called the Brotherhood of Anubis, an outfit that mixes worship of assorted ancient Egyptian gods with the execution of some fairly audacious crimes. The law hasn't been able to bring Winward to book as yet."

"Ambrose is cunning as well as, I must admit, charming."

"Okay, so what has this got to do with the attacks on your husband's cronies?"

Standing, the booted young woman began, as best she could in the cluttered bed chamber, to pace. "When Ambrose and I were still meeting secretly — all that ended nearly two months ago — he asked me to tell him many details of the King Ibis the Second expedition, which the professor had outlined to me in great and sometimes tedious detail." She paused, resting a hand on the back of Harry's fat chair. "Ambrose was very much interested in that expedition to the Valley of the Jackals. He was also gratified to hear that the six leaders of the excavation had kept some of the loot for themselves."

"Loot in general or something specific?"

She replied, "Ambrose was, as I look back on it, most especially

curious about a half dozen scarabs, each made of green jasper and set in gold."

"Why?"

"He never specified the reason for his keen interest in them, Mr. Challenge."

"Who ended up in possession of the scarabs?"

"Each of the six leaders took one." She returned to the love seat. "I am very much afraid that Ambrose Winward is determined to possess all six of those Egyptian scarabs."

"Or maybe he only wants one and doesn't know which fellow has it," he said, leaning forward in his chair. "Now explain how come you knew three thugs were going to jump me."

She folded her hands in her lap, sighing again. "I met a disgruntled member of his Brotherhood of Anubis at a literary salon near Russell Square this afternoon and he revealed their plans to me, knowing that my husband had hired you."

"Who exactly were those unsuccessful assassins?"

"I don't believe, Mr. Challenge, that they meant to kill you — at least not until you shot one of them," said Zuleika. "All three are members of a group that Ambrose uses to do his dirty work and unpleasant chores. They call themselves the Limehouse Assassins."

"Any bunch that give themselves a name like that probably meant me no good from the start," he told her. "How come one of them knew your name?"

"I met some of them, in their unmasked state, while attending some of Ambrose's rather decadent parties at his London townhouse," she said. "I'm not certain which one it was who recognized me."

"What's the name of the disgruntled fellow who tipped you off?"

"That will do you no good, since he was planning to take the boat train earlier this evening and is probably on his way to Calais by now."

Harry rose up off his chair. "Looks as though I'll have to gather up the rest of the scarabs myself before Ambrose and the Brotherhood of Anubis gets around to swiping the damn things."

"You must be very careful," she warned. "He's an extremely dangerous man."

"So am I," Harry assured her.

* * *

Harry looked up from his breakfast coffee when a large cloud of pale green smoke rose up and engulfed the empty chair across the marble table from him.

This unexpected manifestation caused considerable murmuring, and some complaining, among the other guests enjoying breakfast at the surrounding tables in the hotel's dome-lit restaurant.

"Good morning, Lorenzo," said Harry, returning his attention to his cup of coffee.

As the smoke dissipated the portly form of the Great Lorenzo, clad in a nubby tweed suit and a deerstalker cap, could be discerned standing beside the chair.

The magician bowed to his left, then to his right. "The Great Lorenzo, appearing nightly at the Crown Royale Theatre," he announced, fluffing his side whiskers. "Credited by all astute critics of the day as being the most amazing and baffling magician ever to grace the major stages in England and the Continent. Tickets still available for all of the remaining dozen performances." He sat down.

"Deuced bad taste," muttered the white-mustached, decidedly military old gentleman at a nearby table.

"Good morning, my boy." Lorenzo plucked a scone from the silver serving dish. He gestured and a thick dab of marmalade appeared upon it. "You caused me a rather sleepless night."

Picking up his fork, Harry turned his attention to the kipper upon his plate. "Another vision?"

The magician nodded. "I saw you trapped within an ancient pyramid," he explained between bites of scone. "A large horde of voracious greenish beetles were making a meal of you."

"Scarabs, huh?" Harry, thoughtfully, set his fork aside. "What else did you see?"

"As I've often stated, Harry, I make no claims as to the authenticity of my visions." He wiped a scatter of crumbs from his whiskers. "However, I was next favored with the image of a longtime London acquaintance of mine, the illustrious Madame Tandofsky."

"That fat lady who's been working the fake spiritualist dodge over in a flat near the Embankment?"

"Rebecca Tandofsky is a very respectable charlatan," the magician said in her defense. "The point of this particular premonition is, I truly conclude, that she is also an extremely erudite scholar of the occult arts."

"So?"

"As I tossed and turned in my bed — or rather the bed of a by-this-time moderately annoyed duchess — as I tossed and turned, a voice spoke to me."

"The duchess's husband?"

His narrowed left eye and scornful expression indicated what Lorenzo thought of Harry's remark. "This voice told me, quite distinctly, 'Madame Tandofsky can reveal to Harry Challenge the secret of the scarab.'" He leaned back in his chair, smiling. "Am I correct in imagining that this mysterious nocturnal message from beyond may possibly have some meaning to you?"

"Your hunches have been helpful in the past," he said. "Including the stuff about assassins last night."

"Ah, I was wondering about that. Tell me what — "

"Eventually," promised Harry. "First, though, yeah, I am interested in a bunch of scarabs. They tie in with this new case."

The Great Lorenzo smiled again. "Judging that such might well be the case, my boy, I telephoned Rebecca and arranged for us to call on the gifted lady at one o'clock this very day," he informed Harry. "Does that meet with your approval?"

"It does," Harry said.

"I am very fond," said Madame Tandofsky, "of owls."

"So I suspected." Harry seated himself in one of the bentwood chairs in the medium's jasmine-scented parlor.

Atop the dark wood bookcases that covered two of the shadowy room's walls sat eleven owls. At least ten of them, Harry estimated, were stuffed.

Lorenzo, after patting the heavyset Madame Tandofsky fondly on the shoulder, settled onto a purple ottoman. "You are looking, Rebecca, as fetching as usual."

"I've gained another three stone since last we met, Renzo," she said. "But then, there are those who find fat ladies fetching." She weighed close

to two hundred and fifty pounds and was wearing a voluminous, shapeless gown of dark velvet along with a rather dusty headdress composed of bedraggled peacock feathers and one yellowed ostrich plume.

"True, you're not exactly svelte, dear lady, and yet — "

"Since you're Renzo's friend, Challenge, I'll only charge you double my usual fee." The padded rocker she filled creaked and quivered when she turned toward Harry.

"She usually charges three times her mediumistic fee for occult research," explained the magician.

"Two guineas." She extended a pudgy palm toward Harry.

Fishing coins out of his vest pocket, he leaned across the deal table to deposit them in her hand. "What can you tell me about the six scarabs found in the tomb of — "

"The sacred scarabs of King Ibis the Second, ah yes." She held out her other hand. "Renzo, my dear."

Rising from the ottoman, the magician helped the large medium get to her feet. "At your service, dear lady."

Waddling slightly, the hem of her dark gown brushing at the faded Persian carpet, she made her way to one of the bookcases. "Are you still feeling peaked, Oskar?"

The third owl from the left made a raspy hooting noise, fluttering his wings.

"Oskar, I fear, is suffering from the pip." Madame Tandofsky, grunting some, tugged a thick, leather-bound book from a shelf, sending motes of dust spinning.

The owl sneezed.

Wheezing a bit, the medium returned to her rocker and set the book on the wobbly table in front of her. "This is the infamous suppressed edition of Count Monstrodamus's *The Vile Art of Dark Sorcery & How to Apply It to Great Advantage Without the Risk of Eternal Damnation.* All save three copies of the first edition were burned over two centuries ago at the order of the then-Pope." When Madame Tandofsky patted the book, dust rose up from its cover. "For untold centuries, long, long before the sacred resting place of Ibis the Second was defiled, it was known among certain adepts that one of the half dozen carved beetles buried with him was the key to a significant mystical secret. This scarab came to be known

in sorcery circles as the Blazing Scarab and it is said to bestow the gift of eternal life on whomsoever uses it in the proper manner."

Harry was skeptical. "Why didn't Ibis the Second use it for himself?"

"He already believed he was going on to glory, to the Egyptian equivalent thereof," she answered. "If, as dear Renzo informed me, that black-hearted scoundrel Ambrose Winward is gathering together the scarabs, it can only mean he knows that one of them must be the fabled Blazing Scarab."

"Why's it called blazing?"

She grunted again in opening the book of sorcery. Finding the page she sought, wheezing more pronouncedly, Madame Tandofsky poked a pudgy finger at the paragraph on the foxed page. "When the proper scarab of the six is inserted into a certain spot upon the lid of the sarcophagus of King Ibis the Second, it will glow with an intense crimson flame. That's according to the nefarious Count Monstrodamus, who, keep in mind, Challenge, had nothing in the way of firsthand knowledge in this matter. After the scarab flares crimson, a secret compartment in the lid will slide open to reveal a parchment upon which will be found the secret of eternal life."

Rubbing his hands together, Lorenzo observed, "Perhaps I can incorporate something like this into an amazing illusion. 'For the first time on any stage in the entire world, the Blazing Scarab Illusion, which — '"

"Is there any way," Harry asked the medium, "to tell which scarab is the right one?"

She shook her head. "Only by placing it in this proper slot," she replied, pointing to a wood engraving on the page of the ancient book. "They are otherwise identical and that is why Winward is gathering up the entire half dozen of the things."

Getting up from his chair, Harry studied the drawing. "I intend to gather the rest of them ahead of Winward."

She gave him a sympathetic glance. "Opposing him will be very dangerous, young man," she warned.

"Even so," he said.

Things went fairly smoothly until Harry arrived to collect the fourth and last of the remaining scarabs. It was the evening of the day of his illuminating visit to Madame Tandofsky. Rain was falling heavily as the

hansom cab dropped him off in front of the three-story stone house in the small square off Euston Road.

He went sprinting across the sidewalk toward the wrought-iron gate that guarded the grounds surrounding the home of Sir Nigel Marshwood. Chained to his left wrist was a venerable attaché case holding the three other scarabs that he had, with the help of letters and phone calls from Professor Danvers, already gathered up today.

The black gate hung partially open, creaking slightly as the rain-laden wind brushed at it.

Slowing, Harry approached the front steps more cautiously.

The heavy carved oaken door was partially open. The pale gaslight from the wall lamps in the corridor beyond spilled out to illuminate a constable's helmet that had fallen on its side atop the worn welcome mat.

Sliding his .38 from his shoulder holster, Harry moved carefully up the wide brick steps.

Above the sound of the heavy night rain hitting on the gabled roofs of Sir Nigel's house, Harry became aware of a low moaning.

When he reached the topmost step, he stood listening. He heard another, weaker, moan from within the house.

He booted the door open, then pressed back against the porch wall.

Harry allowed nearly a half minute to pass before he ventured across the threshold into the carpeted corridor.

Blotching the sylvan carpet designs were several fresh muddy footprints. They led along the empty corridor toward the open door of the dark-paneled study.

Inside the gas-lit room, sprawled on the thick carpet, was the body of a gaunt man. He was face down, in his fifties, bald, wearing a silk smoking jacket.

This was, judging by the description he'd been given by his client, the body of Sir Nigel Marshwood. There were two exit wounds in his back and he'd apparently died while Harry was making his way along the hall.

Books had been swept from shelves. A large glass case, its top smashed, lay on its side near the corpse of the Egyptologist.

Straightening up after kneeling beside the remains of Sir Nigel, Harry said aloud, "Looks like they got themselves another scarab. But at least I have three of the damned things."

"Not for long, old chap," observed the hooded man who appeared in the study doorway.

Harry grinned. "One of the Limehouse Assassins, I presume."

The thickset man gestured with the Luger in his gloved left hand. "Drop your gun down beside the dear departed, Challenge, and back up against the bookcase, if you please."

Harry didn't comply.

Instead, he dived suddenly toward the right, the attached attaché case flipping out to knock a three-foot high alabaster statue of Osiris off its stand. Harry fired at the hooded assassin while he was midway between his upright position and the floor.

His slug caught the man in the left arm. The man's gloved fingers went splaying out. The Luger dropped, hitting the fallen display case and shattering more of its glass panels.

Harry rose, his gun aimed at the wounded man. "Looks like my collection of scarabs," he said, "is going to grow by one more."

"I don't believe," said Sir Lionel Danvers, "that you've met my wife, Challenge."

"I haven't, nope," lied Harry as he unchained the attaché case from his wrist. He set it upon a workbench in the center of the large, lofty work room of the London Museum of Egyptology. "A pleasure, Lady Danvers."

Wearing an opened dark cloak over an off-white and low-cut evening gown, the young woman was standing beside the ornate quartzite sarcophagus of King Ibis II that rested on a sturdy pine pallet. "It's a pity," she said, "that you weren't able to gather together the entire six scarabs, Mr. Challenge."

Danvers cleared his throat. "I took the liberty," he said, "of telling Zuleika your theory that one of the half dozen scarabs we found in the tomb might be the allegedly magical Blazing Scarab."

Opening the attaché case, Harry extracted the chamois pouch that contained the four scarabs he'd spent the day collecting. "If we're lucky, one of these may be the right one," he said. "And it's not my theory, but that of an alleged sorcerer who called himself Count Monstrodamus. Others apparently believe in the notion or they wouldn't have been after the scarabs."

"You have no idea," asked the professor, "who's been murdering my colleagues and committing the thefts?"

Harry shook the scarabs out of the bag into his hand. "Some notions, but no proof as yet," he answered. "But the Limehouse Assassin I caught at Sir Nigel's may eventually provide an answer. He's being detained by Scotland Yard at the moment, though not yet in a talkative mood."

"Dreadful that poor Nigel was also murdered," said Danvers, sighing. "Bit of a bore, but otherwise a very decent chap."

"The assassin slugged the constable who was keeping an eye on the place, trussed him up and tossed him in the shrubbery," said Harry, approaching the sarcophagus with the quartet of beetles clutched in his fist. "We found the butler in a similar state in the parlor and I found the fourth scarab in the lout's waistcoat pocket, along with a cheap watch."

"So much death," said Zuleika quietly, backing away from the sarcophagus. "It causes one to believe there may well have been a curse in effect." She stopped in the shadows near two upright wooden mummy cases that were propped against the buff-colored wall.

Engraved on the lid of the sarcophagus were two hawks, facing each other, beaks almost touching. Between the tips of the beaks was a concavity the size of a scarab. "According to the engraving in the count's account," explained Harry, "this is where the Blazing Scarab has to be inserted in order to do its job."

"On with it, young man, try them out," urged Professor Danvers, moving closer to him.

Selecting one, Harry fit it in the depression.

Nothing happened.

After waiting a full minute, he pried it free and auditioned a second green jasper beetle.

Again nothing happened.

"Perhaps," commented Danvers, "this is all nonsense."

"Perhaps, yeah." Harry tested the third scarab.

The heavy sarcophagus lid produced a faint grating sound.

Then, dimly at the outset, the scarab began to glow. It turned from green to red, flaring more brightly.

"Jove, the Blazing Scarab," exclaimed Professor Danvers in an awed whisper.

The sarcophagus rattled, made a chattering noise, and then a small ornamental panel, also inscribed with two hawks, popped open.

"That's it." Harry reached toward the emerging compartment.

"This, I very much fear, is going to be awfully frustrating for you, Challenge. But then, anticipation is often much more pleasing than gratification." One of the gilded mummy cases had swung open with a whining creak and a tall, pale, moderately overweight man of about forty, built roughly along the lines of Oscar Wilde, stepped into the workshop. He held an ornately filigreed dueling pistol grasped in his hand.

"It's Winward," gasped Zuleika, bringing her hand up to her pale cheek.

"This is the fellow who's been gathering scarabs," said Harry, his hand poised near the compartment.

"I've read of him." Danvers scowled at the intruder. "He's a wastrel and a decadent reprobate."

"Yes, the newspapers do tend to flatter me." Winward waved Harry back from the sarcophagus with his gun hand. "In actuality, dear professor, I am a satanic sorcerer and vicious master criminal."

"And a second-rate artist," added Harry, backing a few paces.

"That good, do you think?" Winward's pleased smile broadened. "Now then, Challenge, old man, if you'll move even farther away, I'll collect the papyrus that I've been seeking. I must admit that I'm rather eager to learn the secret of eternal life."

Professor Danvers asked, "You killed three men for that?"

"I'm merely following one of the basic principles of our imperialist British diplomatic policy," Winward pointed out, easing closer to the sarcophagus. "You kill a batch of your inferiors so that you yourself may thrive."

Gun aimed at Harry, Winward thrust his free hand into the open stone compartment. "Once I decipher this ancient...damme!"

He yanked back his pale, plump hand, grimacing, shaking it violently. The tip of his forefinger was bleeding.

"A poisoned needle, I'll wager," said the professor.

Windward turned to him. "One of the few occasions when you've ever been right about...." He shuddered, swayed, fell against the sarcophagus and then dropped to the parquet floor where his body twitched for about ten seconds. The fallen dueling pistol had gone skittering toward Zuleika.

She ran to the fallen man, cloak swirling. "Ambrose," she said, genuflecting beside him.

Kneeling next to her, Harry reached out to take hold of Winward's wrist. "No pulse," he said, standing up. "I'll go to your office, professor, and use the telephone to summon the police."

Very carefully, Danvers crouched and squinted into the compartment. "This is totally empty," he said. "If there ever was a document inside, it was removed centuries ago and the poisoned needle installed."

"There's probably a lesson here for us all." Harry crossed to the doorway.

As he started down the shadowy museum hallway, he heard the professor ask his wife, "How is that you addressed this scoundrel by his first name, my dear?" ☞



"It says, 'Turn back NOW! Your funding ran out.'"

Claudia O'Keefe is the author of one novel, Black Snow Days, *and her short fiction has appeared in* Midnight Zoo, Aboriginal SF, *and elsewhere. For the past few years, her writing has been less science-fictional in nature: she edited three family-themed anthologies,* Mother, Forever Sisters, *and* Father, *and last year she won the international Shell* Economist *Prize for an essay about her stepfather, a salesman who traveled Route 66 selling brassieres. Her first appearance here is also a story about traveling the roads, but this dark fantasy is about the economics of the heart.*

Black Deer

By Claudia O'Keefe

THEY CREPT THROUGH A forest on fire.

Caroline, her hands sweaty from one of the many hot flashes that had added to her panic since they'd started out on their drive, was behind the wheel. Her husband, Sandy, sat in the passenger's seat, restless.

"Why are you being so nutso about this?" he asked. "It's okay. Really. I believe you. They were there. You saw them."

"No, you don't," she said. "I can tell."

Her eyes anxiously scanned the sides of the road, hoping to see the deer.

Around them the trees blazed with the most intense autumn foliage the two had ever seen, as if the woods really were going up in flames. Their leaves lit from behind by October light, the sugar maples, scarlet oaks, dogwoods, and hop hornbeams colored the woods more vibrantly than anything she could create on the computer screen with which she worked each day at her design firm. Every so often, a breeze crossed the narrow rural highway, sending leaves whirling down and across the road, a shower

of twisting, twirling sparks in red, yellow, orange, and purple, like tiny comets falling from a lesser sky.

Though the illusion of a mountain ablaze was only that, Caroline felt yet another wave of heat wash uncomfortably through her body. What was this? Her twelfth one?

I'm too young for hot flashes, she thought. I'm not even forty.

Caroline would swear they'd navigated every road in this rural Virginia county in the past four hours, all to no avail. She'd driven at a speed that had the locals climbing up on her tail, forcing her to pull over to the side of the road again and again, letting entire trains of cars go by, all in the hopes of spotting an unusual and elusive herd of deer she remembered from close to twenty years before.

"Why now?" Sandy asked. "Why is it so important to find them again after all these years?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I just want to."

"Need to, is more like it."

"Is that okay?"

Sandy had always been an indulgent husband, right up to the time things started to go wrong for them. Obliging, but always with a lot of mock exasperation, heavy sighs, half-hidden rolling of his eyes, his mild features infused with a no-nonsense retro manliness that would have been more appropriate in the days of black and white movies.

"Sure," he said. "Let's go for it."

They started out in Staunton, leaving behind the Shenandoah Valley, its terrifying interstate and relentlessly verdant cow pastures, climbing higher and higher into the Appalachians, past the rotting remnants of mills built two centuries before, 1950s brick ranchers, and vaguely white farmhouses that appeared picturesque only until you were nearly on top of them, whereupon they lost their small town Disney magic and merely looked junky.

Bypassing Buffalo Gap, circumventing Elliot Knob, and choosing to ignore West Augusta, they drove through Deerfield by 8:30 A.M., having chosen it as a tentative goal for the name alone. Caroline spotted no deer, not even the common white-tailed variety that so often lay in broken heaps by the sides of the highway, victims of head-on collisions with pickup trucks. An hour later they left the Appalachians behind for the Alleghenies near the West Virginia border.

If only she could remember where exactly she'd seen the deer cross the road so long ago.

"What about Grant?" Sandy asked. "Isn't he going to be worried?"

Grant, her fiancé, was back in their hotel room, still asleep, she hoped, blissfully unaware that she'd gotten up before it was light to take this forbidden drive with her old husband. Sandy wasn't supposed to be in her life anymore.

"I wanted to tell him," she said, "but I didn't want to wake him."

"Coward," Sandy said. "Did you at least leave a note?"

"What are you afraid of, that he's going to call you out into an alley and ask you to settle things the old-fashioned way?"

"Not hardly."

A chipmunk darted into the road, then retreated with lightning speed even before Caroline could react and brake. She decided it was best to change the subject. "Did I tell you that the old fruit packing plant off Broadway back home burned down two weeks ago?"

"The brick Victorian one? With the giant apple crate label painted on the side?"

Caroline nodded.

"God, I loved that old place. Loved hanging out there...."

"With you," she finished for him, turning her face to meet his gaze, smiling a tight smile. "Me, too."

His return smile was a sad one, which fit. Both she and Sandy had gone to high school in the same northern California town, at the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas, former Gold Rush territory.

"Was it arson?" he asked finally.

"I don't know. But something strange happened while it was on fire. I saw something bizarre."

"Bizarre how?"

"Very weird. They called in a water bomber to help put out the fire. I guess the fire was getting too big for a couple of small-town fire trucks to handle from the ground. A bunch of us were standing on that hill that overlooks where Main and Broadway come together, right above the fruit plant. Do you remember how the roof was just below the top of that ridge?"

"Yeah. Well, sort of. No, not really."

"It was," she said, "and so were the flames. They were almost cartoony, like Mexican folk art, like a milagro, with flames sprouting from a sacred heart. You know?"

His voice encouraged her to continue. "Okay."

"Suddenly, the tanker plane swoops in to drop its load. It was so low it flew right past us, the cockpit window on the same level as all of us standing on the hill. We could see right in. I could see the pilot's face even though he was eight stories off the ground."

She hesitated, not knowing how to finish her story.

"What is it, Caroline? What happened?"

Their current choice of road came to an abrupt end when it intersected another one perpendicular to it. A honeysuckle-ensnared sign on the other side of the three-way intersection gave them a choice. Turn left toward a place called Cherry Lick. Turn right toward Monterrey.

She recognized neither and turned left.

"What happened?" he repeated.

"I remembered something."

How did she explain it to him, to anyone? It made no sense. Watching the tanker fly by on a level with her face had given her a flashback of different, long suppressed memory.

When she was not even five years old, she and her parents had lived in the desert, hours north of Los Angeles in a lonely subdivision with only six houses. Her father was stationed at Edwards Air Force Base. Jets scorched the sky overhead most days while she played in the backyard, their contrails crisscrossing above the vast expanse of undeveloped land and parched hills that lay beyond the houses.

One afternoon, however, brought a completely different sight. As she stood digging up the brown grass below their clothesline with a stick, an odd craft zipped low to the ground through the side yards separating her house from the one next door. It had no wings and resembled a missile, except that it was large enough to carry a person inside. She could see the occupant's face while the slender silver object streaked by inches from the top of her fence.

As a thirty-eight-year-old woman, Caroline was stunned to recover this memory of a sight she could never have seen. Thinking back on it, she realized she had no clue what she'd actually witnessed as a child, if she'd

witnessed anything at all, perhaps distorted a common sight, or dreamed it up from a five-year-old's working knowledge of the world. What shocked her most was that until only two weeks ago, this recollection had been cataloged as a real thing. All her life, even if in her mind's dimmest recesses, she had believed in it. Her once naive eyes had seen what they'd seen, accepting it without question, and stored the visual away as if it were just another mundane childhood memory.

"Huh," was all Sandy said when she finally stumbled through the complete rendition. He appeared thoughtful, yet confused. She could identify. She felt bewildered.

"It bothers me," she said, "that this whole time I never questioned the reality of it. It was never true."

By now she realized the hot flashes were a form of panic attack, because she had other symptoms as well. Her heart skipped unevenly in her chest and her throat constricted. She struggled to breathe.

Narrowing more the farther they went, the country highway squeezed down until there was no room for a double line in the middle of the road, constricted to the point where any form of center line had to be completely abandoned. Instead of slowing, she sped up. By now Grant would be awake. He would wonder where she'd gone. How long before he began to worry? She should call him.

Digging into her handbag, which lay beside her seat, she fished for her cell, opened it one-handed and activated it, waiting for a signal. No response. Was it any wonder?

"Damn. I can't get a signal."

"We should turn back."

"No!" she shouted, then in a more reasonable tone. "No. Just a little bit longer. There's got to be a gas station with a pay phone somewhere out here."

A service station, yes, but no phone. Seven miles after the rural route became a single paved lane, and two miles beyond that, when the asphalt itself crumbled away leaving only the suggestion of pavement, they finally reached Cherry Lick.

Outside the rundown Quonset hut that was the community's only visible building, Caroline spotted five pickups and a Geo Metro with so many replaced door and fender panels of varying colors that it resembled

a patchwork quilt. She had no idea where the people who owned the vehicles lived because neither she nor Sandy had seen a house or mobile home for the last forty-five minutes.

Cherry Lick had one working gas pump, and one vintage, glass-walled phone booth, minus the phone. A series of crudely painted signs tacked onto the front of the windowless hut advertised ice cold drinks, official NASCAR memorabilia, and a game checking station.

"You want something?" she asked Sandy once she parked.

"I'm good."

"I'm going to get something."

"I'm fine."

"I'll get you a water," she said, got out with her purse, and shut the car door.

Inside, Caroline found an old man with a hunter's cap and a belly encased in a faded olive drab T-shirt with rips in the underarms. He stood behind a low counter, arms crossed, chewing something. Caroline met his eyes, but he didn't acknowledge her.

She snatched two Poland Spring waters in sports bottles out of the cold case and set them on the counter. Lazily, he uncrossed his arms and reached for the bottles, searching them up and down for the tiny price stickers that were plainly visible on the caps.

"Is this Cherry Lick?" she asked the obvious.

"Has been for a while now," he said.

"Have you lived here long?"

Off in a corner, she heard laughter, and turned to see half a dozen men in hunters' camouflage and mud-caked boots drinking coffee and smoking at a group of mismatched dinette tables. All stared at her.

"Have I lived here long?" he asked his buddies at the tables.

More chuckling.

"I'm asking because I'm wondering if you were here twenty years ago," Caroline said.

"I was here. We all were."

"Did you ever see a herd of black deer around here?"

"Black deer!" He swung around to face his friends, his body language shutting her out. "Any you see any black deer around here ever?"

"Why you want nigger deer for, lady?" said one of the men.

"There ain't no black deer around here," said another.

The man who'd made the racial slur took a deep drag on his cigarette, then, resting his elbows on the table, clasped his fingers together into a single fist, cigarette poking upward like an out-of-place digit. He cocked his head thoughtfully. "I wonder if they'd taste any different, though, you know. Darkie deer."

The man at the counter faced her again. "Nope. No black deer here."

Back in the car, Caroline dropped the waters into the twin cup-holders attached to the dash. She turned the ignition, reached for her water, popped off the cap, and took a long swallow. Her hand was shaking.

"Were they any help in there?" Sandy asked, climbing back into the car. He'd gotten out to stretch his legs.

"No. None."

They took off, following directions from a sign that promised a main highway was just eight miles away.

It was 1:12 according to the clock in the dash. With her not having left a word of explanation, Grant must be getting frantic by now. She couldn't let this go on much longer. She had to get to a phone, but was terrified to give up her search. They wound around switchbacks that carried them up a mountainside so steep and slippery with loose rock she was afraid to stop for fear their car would begin sliding backward and go off the road. Her panic escalated into full-blown dread, which centered itself in her forehead like an inescapable migraine. She almost couldn't sit still behind the wheel.

Sandy wasn't blind, and somewhere, still cared for her. "How about as soon as we get off this road we go get some lunch?" he urged her. "You don't need to find them today. We can find a phone and you can call. You'll feel much better if you can talk to him."

"Thank you," she said.

"For what?"

"For being so adult about Grant."

He joked. "Easy. I'm here. He's there."

She'd never driven through darker woods. The mountains folded in on the road with a smothering embrace. If any place were going to harbor a herd of creatures no one else had seen, this should be it. Her gaze flicked anxiously from one side of the road to the other, up one treacherous, shrouded slope, down another. Here. It had to be here.

Lurching forward and down, with a grinding scrape coming from the undercarriage, they unexpectedly crested the mountain and dropped out onto a three-lane highway. Two gas stations, a post office, and a restaurant-motel greeted the couple from the other side.

A horn blared to their right. Caroline hit the brakes and swerved, barely avoiding a black SUV. They were back in semi-civilization.

Defeat instantly overwhelmed her, stunning her to the point where she barely heard the siren. Her mind scrambled for direction and gradually, she brought the car to a stop on the road's shoulder. Glancing in the rearview mirror, she spotted a uniformed officer approaching the driver's side window.

"License and registration, ma'am."

She handed the man her license. "It's a rental," she said.

Sandy pointed at the plastic envelope with the car's papers clipped to her visor. "Oh," she mumbled. "Here it is."

The cop took her I.D. and the registration back to his patrol car and used his radio.

"I remember that day so clearly," she told Sandy. "The dogwoods blooming all over the place, the acid green spring leaves. Where we ate. What we ate. That stupid turtle we stopped and rescued from the middle of the road. And the herd of pure black deer that went leaping across the road as we made a turn. They were gorgeous. Strange. Glossy. Practically mythic."

She and Sandy had been in perfect, untarnished love. Married just under three months, a decade before the rushed trip to the hospital which ultimately tore them apart.

An uncomfortable silence drifted into the car.

Finally Caroline dispelled it. "I looked it up on the Internet in our hotel room last night."

The cop came back. Flipped open his book and started to write her a ticket.

"Looked up what?" Sandy asked.

"There are no black deer herds," Caroline told him. "No such thing."

She could see it dawning on his face, why she wanted the deer so badly, worried they had never existed. "No black deer? Not anywhere in North America?"

"Maybe one darker-colored deer in millions. Not even really black, dark gray."

"Maybe the ones you saw had gotten dirty."

Shook her head again.

"Maybe there was some sort of rare genetic defect."

"No, Sandy! You didn't see them."

He was quiet.

"And neither did I. They never existed."

"What did you say?" the officer stopped writing in his book and asked.

"Nothing," Caroline's voice was a faint whisper. "Sorry."

The man took a step sideways, bent down and peered suspiciously into the vacant back seat, and then back at her in the front. He took in the second bottle of water still capped and full, the empty passenger's seat beside Caroline.

"I thought I heard you say something."

"I didn't. I mean I did, but it was nothing."

"Oh, Caroline," Sandy said, his eyes bright with concern and something almost like joy. "Honey." The backs of his fingers reached up to her cheek to catch the tears that threatened while the cop stood watching her. She felt Sandy's touch, a whisper of affection that surely didn't exist. "The past is still there. I promise. Right where it's always been."



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From Claudia O'Keefe's jaunt into backroads America, we take you now to a small town in a different part of the country, where some people fit in...and others don't. Mr. Jacobs, who moved from Manhattan to the Hamptons a few years ago, reports that his story collection My Rose & My Glove, *is due out soon.*

A Friendly Little Oasis

By Harvey Jacobs

KOVACHO SANK HIS TEETH into the pliant neck of the girl he'd met at the library. They'd struck up a conversation about Romanian poetry and one thing led to another. She was obviously taken with his good looks, seductive accent, and easy manner; he was pleased with her plump, responsive body and bow lips. They dined together. The girl was so involved with her lamb chops she didn't notice that her new friend never swallowed a single morsel. After dinner, she only hesitated long enough to keep her dignity before agreeing to go to his place for a nightcap. It came as something of a surprise that her blood, hot and sweet, was the nightcap.

When he had drained the lady dry, Kovacho carried her remains to the trash disposal room down the hall. He had moved from his last address when that city, in an effort to help purify its polluted air, passed a law forbidding the burning of refuse. Damned government interference. Cleansing flames were replaced by compacters. In this new location there were no such restrictions, at least not yet. Bottles, newspapers, and cans were recycled but generic garbage could be stuffed into a bag and thrown down

a shaft to the basement crematorium, a civilized and much more satisfying system.

Kovacho had some trouble stuffing his kill through the narrow incinerator door — those doors were always too small — but he succeeded by folding her arms over her breasts and pushing hard. He heard the orange fire sputter and hiss with almost as much pleasure over her leftovers as he'd enjoyed taking his evening nourishment.

It was Kovacho's habit to take a long stroll after dinner. He went back to his apartment to rinse his mouth, brush his fangs, wash his hands and face and comb his thick, curly hair before setting out to explore his new neighborhood. It was then that he noticed a red stain on the left collar of his white dress shirt. The stain was not much larger than a pinhead but that vermilion dot broke the symmetry of his otherwise perfect outfit. Kovacho was usually a neat eater but the girl was so ripe, so juicy he'd emptied her ravenously, carelessly, and somehow managed to soil his only shirt with a drop of blood. All his other clothing and sundry possessions were still in transit, clogged into a moving van held up by bad weather somewhere in the Midwest. Kovacho considered his options: to take a stroll as planned or curl up in the bedroom closet of his new apartment, his sanctuary until his casket was delivered along with fresh laundry.

He examined the minuscule fleck of blood, dipped a paper towel into soapy water and tried to erase it but failed. In fact, that effort not only spread the stain but rumpled a corner of his compromised collar. Still, it was a tiny imperfection, hard to see even from up close, much less at a distance in darkening streets. He decided to suppress vanity and a touch of paranoia; his neighbors wouldn't exactly welcome a resident vampire and certainly not a soiled one.

Kovacho found his hat and cane and set out for a brisk walk through the town described in *Modern Maturity* magazine as "not too big, not too small, an oasis of charming places and smiling faces."

It was a lovely evening. A soft wind blew over the town like angel breath. Kovacho smiled at his reaction to the tranquil town after the bustle of the big city. In a way, he missed the avalanche of noise and galloping crowds but in another way he appreciated the chance to relax his senses, even his guard. He felt as if he'd found the ideal place to spend at

least the balance of the century. He was overdue for some peace and quiet. Peering into the windows of little shops — they called themselves *shoppes* — that sold clothing, Kovacho could easily see that the woman he'd met at the library was no exception. The sizes displayed for both sexes clearly showed that the citizens of his oasis were prone to impressive girth; even the children were shaped like tops and cherubs. There would be no problem satisfying his appetite.

Kovacho turned a corner onto a broad avenue. His fellow citizens did not rush along, they moved at a slow, steady pace. Their faces were not angry big city faces, they were relaxed, content faces often with temptingly chubby cheeks mounted on generous necks. Kovacho began to whistle a tune from his childhood. He brimmed with nostalgia wondering where his mother and father were feeding these days; he hadn't seen them in eons.

"Excuse me...."

Kovacho was jolted from his reverie by a stringy older man who didn't look to have enough blood for an *hors d'oeuvre*. "Are you speaking with me?" Kovacho asked.

"I hope you don't mind," the intruder said. "I thought you might like to know that there's a small stain on your collar. Something red. I'd bet a splash of Bordeaux."

"Thank you for telling me," Kovacho said, wincing.

"I'm Wilbur Fein, Fein Insurance. I don't recognize you and I pride myself in knowing everyone in town." Wilbur Fein reached out his spindly hand and Kovacho reluctantly pumped at it. "I know wine can be a problem but I think I have a suggestion. When you get home, let the collar soak in some plain seltzer. I've seen that technique used on the most delicate fabrics."

"Seltzer," Kovacho said. "Plain seltzer. Interesting. I appreciate the advice."

"No problem, sir. And if you ever need insurance, as who doesn't these days, or if you want to review any policies you have, here, take my card." Kovacho accepted a small card with raised type and a picture of Wilbur Fein patting a collie. "We insure against everything unexpected, from volcanoes to sink holes to floods to vampires. And face it, shit happens. Just ask your collar." Kovacho nodded while Fein laughed. He pocketed the fancy card and walked along as quickly as possible, leaving

his new acquaintance waving a fond farewell. "Seltzer. Works miracles," Fein said. "Beautiful shirt. A shame if it's ruined. Wine has its downside but, hey, let's not forget the good side, eh? *Vinny Veritas*, eh?"

"Oh, yes," Kovacho said, watching what he considered the well-meaning idiot vanish around a corner. He suddenly salivated though he wasn't the least bit hungry, certainly not tempted by Wilbur Fein. The Pavlovian response was triggered by the sight of a tall, blonde woman crossing the street, walking toward him. It had been a while since Kovacho dined on a mature lady, that combination of beauty, brains, and wisdom that rivaled any James Beard recipe. He was surprised when the woman smiled warmly at him. He smiled back, convinced that she had him confused with someone else.

"Good evening," the tempting Amazonian said. Kovacho grinned at her, a bit shy in the presence of such grace and radiance. "I know I have no right to offer gratuitous advice to a perfect stranger but I couldn't help but hear Mr. Fein do the same. I wanted to tell you about Exit™, a marvelous new stain remover on sale this week at the A&P. It disappeared an awful blotch of Merlot from my white carpet with one application. But now that I'm standing so close to you, I suspect the stain isn't wine at all."

"Not wine?" Kovacho said feeling a ripple of anxiety. "What then?"

"Ketchup," the woman said. "Or some kind of tomato sauce. And I can't vouch for Exit™'s effectiveness against ketchup since I've never tried it."

"Yes," Kovacho said, "you're absolutely right. It isn't wine — certainly not since I am not a drinker — and, yes, it could be Heinz Tomato Ketchup™ or possibly marinara sauce since I did come in contact with both an order of French fries at lunch, shame on me, and spaghetti and meatballs at dinner. And I do very much appreciate your interest in the plight of a perfect or even imperfect stranger."

"Think nothing of it," the lady said. "We're very friendly in this town. Often to the point of trampling on privacy. Well...."

"I was thinking," Kovacho said, "without being too forward, that you might share your telephone number. Perhaps we can get better acquainted over a cup of coffee some enchanted evening."

"You are a smoothie," the woman said. "On close inspection, I think definitely ketchup." Then she wrote her telephone number on a piece of paper from a spiral pad she carried in her purse. "I'd be interested to know how Exit™ worked on that smudge."

"Smudge?" Kovacho said. "You'd call it a smudge?"

"Marginal between a stain and a smudge," the woman said. "By the way, my name is Angela. I look forward to hearing from you, Mr...."

"Kovacho. Kovach Kovacho. It's Romanian."

"Ah, a vampire," Angela said. "Cancel that remark. An old joke."

When they parted, Kovacho made a mental note to consider Angela for Sunday dinner. He frequently had Chinese food on Sundays but thought a change might do him good. It wouldn't be easy getting Angela past the incinerator door, she was a formidable package, but it could be fun to take on the challenge. "Wine. Ketchup. What a town," Kovacho whispered to the night. "Such cheerful buttinskies." He wondered how much inbreeding contributed to the busybody mindset.

He went on his way after tucking Angela's phone number into an inside pocket, passing a few locals without being accosted. As he relaxed, enjoying his separation from the usual stress of honking horns and pushy crowds, tonguing flecks of the ample girl that had lodged between his lower teeth, settling back into the lull of twilight, he felt a tug at his right pants leg. He thought it was a dog. He hated dogs and they returned the enmity; dogs knew too much. But it was no dog, it was a child, a melon of a lad, staring up at Kovacho's angry face. "Release my trousers, young man," he said, looking around for some mother or father or supervisor, whoever had let go of the leash.

"Mister, there's cherry cough syrup on your collar. What is it, Robitussin™? You have a chest cold, right? So do I." The child coughed up a spasm of phlegm and spit it on the sidewalk. "Fever too. No school tomorrow." He inhaled a long wheeze.

"I have no cold," Kovacho said, wondering why he bothered to say anything. "The stain is not from cough syrup. Now go away. You seem infectious. You should be in bed swallowing penicillin."

"He barfed a tablespoon of the stuff on his blanket. Henry's bed looks like a scene out of a horror movie." A short, square woman in tight slacks caught the boy in a near headlock. "He's so friendly," she said. "I'm his aunt. He lives with me. You're probably wondering what happened to my sister, his mother. We don't know. She just upped and left with a Buddhist who ran an exercise class. And his father? Who can say. Henry isn't usually out this late, believe me, but I needed to do some shopping and I couldn't leave him home alone."

"I understand," Kovacho said.

"Being a substitute single parent is no fun, let me tell you. But somebody's got to do it. He saw your wee red stain and ran over here before I realized what...."

"No matter."

"I hope you won't catch his flu. I suggest you stock up on zinc lozenges, extract of echinacea, and rose hips tea."

"I love that name, rose hips. Refulgent," Kovacho said.

"Huh?" the lady said.

"Nothing. A word I happen to like."

"Henry had a point though. It does look like cherry cough syrup."

"It isn't."

"If it turns out to be Robitussin™, try old-fashioned Clorox™ and a hot wash in Tide™. Set your drier on medium heat. You don't want the shirt to shrink to a handkerchief." She laughed. "Forgive me. I get carried away."

"All is forgiven," Kovacho said, "and thank you for your concern."

Henry wheezed again, a long, painful note worthy of John Cage. Kovacho shuddered. He hated bacteria and microbes, anything microscopic like body dander, and feared the worst for himself. He had no desire to spend a week spewing glue and snot in a miasmal cloud of droplets. "If it ain't cherry cough syrup, he must be a vampire," the boy said, gagging on the liquefied putrefaction that escaped his lungs.

"Henry," his aunt said. "Apologize to this man at once."

"It doesn't matter," Kovacho said. "Good evening, then. I hope your nephew feels better very soon." He finished the sentence silently: *though I would like to watch horned owls rip out his intestines.*

"Get me a sharp piece of wood or a silver bullet," Henry said.

"Silver bullets are for werewolves, you dunce," Kovacho said.

"We don't talk to our children in that manner," the aunt said. She grabbed the boy under an arm and dragged him away.

A block farther up the avenue, a homeless man held out his hand toward Kovacho. "Let me guess. Beets," the beggar said. "How did you manage to drip beet sauce on your collar?"

"I dislike beets," Kovacho said. "And I have no loose change."

"Those fancy pistachio nuts?" the man said. "Do they still dye them? I heard the red dye they use on the shells can give you a cancer."

"I don't know," Kovacho said, "I haven't had anything to do with

pistachio nuts since I developed an allergy. I break out."

"You know what works wonders? Vodka. Not the designer brands. The stuff they hide on the bottom shelf. Of course, there's always Whisk™ or Zout Oxy™. But you can't swallow the leftovers."

Kovacho turned abruptly and headed home. His quiet walk had turned into a nightmare; he felt as if the minuscule stain had swelled to the size of a beacon crowning a lighthouse. When he reached the corner, an old lady leaned out of a Studebaker sedan waiting at a stoplight. "Do you mind telling me where you found raspberries this time of year? There's nothing I enjoy more than a ripe raspberry though I am suspicious of the ones from places like Chile or Peru. I saw a documentary that said they use fertilizer made from human waste. So much for NAFTA. I see by your shirt that you've been at the raspberries, unless you're a vampire, ha ha, so if you know of a market selling them, I would be grateful for the information. I mean fresh berries, not that jam without seeds." The light changed to green and a barrage of horns forced the ancient driver to roll along before Kovacho could say anything.

A few feet from his house, Kovacho was blocked by a young couple filling the space between a tree and a neighboring building. They were in a passionate embrace. Kovacho listened to the music of their moans, experiencing a flood of nostalgia, a deluge of memories of sweet, soft companions who had helped him through the most difficult of nights before he drank their nectar. "May I pass?" he said after a few minutes. "There's a puddle in the gutter and I really don't wish to soak my socks and shoes. You see, my clothes are *en route*, stalled on a highway out there in the great beyond, so if I step off into that sludgy lake I would have nothing to wear tomorrow."

There was a pop as the couple separated, their suction broken by the sudden withdrawal. The girl had a warm, puppy face with large eyes, a neat nose, a lovely mouth, perky breasts, slender legs and the kind of rose hips that might really cure the flu. She had a short, tight haircut, almost military, that hugged her skull. In contrast, her man was a hairy ball that reminded Kovacho of a baby's toy, something to cuddle in a crib or playpen. His entire head was a bush of hair and a sprawl of beard. The only other visible part of him was a pair of furry wrists. Even his hands were coated with fuzz. "Look at his shirt," the man said. "Red ink."

"I see," the girl said. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Damn right," the man said. "So who is it you work for? FBI? CIA? Secret Service? Or do you just like to hang around the library censoring phrases, sentences, paragraphs, whole pages because it amuses you?"

"He might be IRS," the girl said.

"I think not," the man said. "He doesn't smell like an accountant. But just for the record, do you doctor books for some major corporation or just screw over the little guys trying to make it against the odds?"

"Please let me pass," Kovacho said. "I'm coming down with something and I need to get to my medication."

"He's a publisher," the man said. "So whose manuscript did you decimate today? Maybe mine?"

"I am not familiar with your work," Kovacho said. "In fact, I just moved here from...."

"Oh," the girl said, "watch out, darling. He's having a movement."

"Enough is enough," the man said. "We're behaving like adolescent fools. Hey, mister, we were just having some fun is all. And I do have a suggestion about the red ink. Salt water, a little flour, lemon, and oregano. It should get rid of that blot."

"Blot?" Kovacho said.

"Unless it's not red ink. Unless you're a vampire," the man said. "Yuk yuk."

"He does have that thirsty look they have in George Romero movies," the girl said.

"Whose blood is that dribble on your shirt? Anybody I knew?"

"Dribble?" Kovacho said.

"Let him get past," the man said. "You'll have him yelling for Homeland Security."

"It could be a nosebleed," the girl said. "When you get home, put a Turkish towel around your head, boil up water in a kettle, and inhale the steam. That opens the passages. Moisture is the key. Hot and wet."

"Get a room," Kovacho said, pushing between them.

On the staircase leading to his floor, Kovacho was blocked again, this time by a rotund figure so androgynous as to make genre identification impossible. The person, gasping from the effort of carrying a huge bag of bottles and cans, had a man's face but skin smooth as a nun's.

"'Scuse, please," the person said. "I'm your super. You're the one who just moved into 3B, the one whose name sounds like a vegetable?"

"I am Mr. Kovacho from 3B, correct. Perhaps if you lift the bag and inhale to the maximum and if I slide along the banister...."

"My name is Bromovich," the super said. "from 1A. If you need anything, let me know."

"What I need is enough air space to pass," Kovacho said. "I'm trying to get to my apartment."

"No need to get snappy," the super said, breathing in a high percentage of the available oxygen in the stairwell, flattening the substantial belly as much as possible. Kovacho managed to inch his way around the mound as the super exhaled a small hurricane. "Your shirt is messed up, you know that? Looks to me like wine, ketchup, cough syrup, the dye they used to use on pistachio nuts, or maybe good old red ink unless you cut yourself shaving or worse case scenario you happen to be a vampire. Or should I say *van*pire? I understand your furniture hasn't been delivered yet. Whatever the stain is, it is ugly, like a mole, if you don't mind my saying so. When that happens to me I whip up a mix of soap, seltzer water, Clorox™, Tide™ and would you believe a shot of vodka? Then I mix in a few drops of Wash Away™ and take a few swipes with a Spray 'n' Wash Stain Stick™. It's like a miracle."

Kovacho nodded and hurried upstairs. He looked around the empty rooms of his new nest and examined the closet where he'd have to sleep until his proper bed arrived. He thought about the town he had chosen, this oasis of charming places and smiling faces. Every one of the smiling faces had mentioned vampires. That showed an unexpected degree of sophistication. Or were they watching too much television?

It took Kovacho only minutes before he decided to leave this promised "island of tranquility" to get back to Manhattan, the island he'd escaped, the indifferent city, dirty city, crowded city, arrogant city, but a city embracing difference, tolerant of bum piss, pigeon droppings, shrieks frozen in graffiti, curses carved into sidewalk cement and stains on ruffled shirts.

He would call the moving company tomorrow, after he spoke with his real estate agent. Breaking his lease might present some legal problems but even if it cost a few months' rent it was well worth it. This was simply not his town. Kovacho looked at the red pinpoint on his collar in a bathroom mirror. That stain would never come out; his favorite shirt would never be the same. Kovacho stripped off his clothes and climbed into the bedroom closet, pulling the door closed behind him.

Just a few months ago, Michael Libling rang in the holidays with his dark fantasy "Christmas in the Catskills." Now he gives us a vision of the near future—a future in which people spend lots of time gazing into their pasts. Are those who learn from the past condemned to regress it?

The Gospel of Nate

By Michael Libling

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE nights.

I'm on shift maybe ten minutes when this twisted preppy, guts more pickled than a jar of dills, gets it going. She's loud and proud and dense enough to think I'm buying her crock, that she'd ridden with Custer, been Clark Gable's first wife, been wet nurse to Sylvia Plath, been Mary Todd Lincoln's mother's best friend (cleverly not Mary Todd herself), served as the third Archbishop of Canterbury, been personal physician to Mao Ze-dong, and a bunch of other high-blown lifedocs that just don't ring true. (Except maybe that Sylvia Plath one, whoever she is.)

I could run a retrochek on her and sic the history rats on her bull, but there isn't any point. She's riding on an Oldies 107.9 FM freebie and the look in her eyes tells me all I need to know. Coming up empty leaves you emptier than you've ever been before. I knew, of course; I'd been there.

Next up, an old fart dumps his pension check on an all-dressed twentieth-century dive that stalls in vaudeville and, because the sound

buffers are down again in Retropod Twelve, I get to hear who-was-that-woman-I-saw-you-with-last-night-that-was-no-woman-that-was-my-wife maybe eighty or ninety times before he gets a break on Broadway and belts out the entire score of *Annie Get Your Gun* in a ruptured falsetto that reminds me of that time in school I caught a fastball in the nuts. Tells me to call him Ethel as he wheezes out into the dark.

And just when I think the worst is over, some punk rips off half his own nose trying to claw the chip out during a REM 4 that dipped too fast into what he calls a Khmer Rouge bloodbath — even does me the favor of spelling it out. Sherky draws the asshole's attention to the sign behind the cash — WE ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR PAST LIVES — but the jerk thinks otherwise, and throws his hands round Sherky's neck like he's his laundry bag. Big mistake. I pull him off, give him a head-butt to the bridge, and send him into the street, where he bleeds vengeance, not on Hadley, not on Inochi Corp. — the clowns who made the chip — and not on Sherky, but on me, the night manager, a guy who's doing his best to get by. (There was nothing special about the punk. Run-ins with his sort were routine. I forgot about him soon as I was done with him. Only wish he would have forgotten me. Yeah, Wray Erling Dreng he was. Didn't even connect the name to the face until I had to.)

Five years on the night shift and I still hankered not just for the days, but for the good old days. Before the Surgeon General's report and the AMA and FDA bulletins and the WHO directive and all that other crap. When people would come in and blow their heads off or o.d. or hara-kiri on me. Yeah, it was busy and messy and I hated the cleaning up, but I made a small fortune in overtime (thanks to all the mopping and scrubbing and disinfecting), and the job never beat me down. Not like nights.

And the tips. Man, the tips were good, back then. The LWTs — Last-Will-and-Testamenters — were something else, I tell you. No more than a few months out of school, my first Christmas on the job, some flake-a-zoid named Tackaberry promises me three hundred grand. No bull. Three hundred big ones. "It is what you would expect of a disciple of our Lord at this time of year, is it not, Nathan Stark?" Never failed, the creepiest customers were the ones who felt compelled to speak your name tag, act all buddy-buddy with you. On the upside, this guy was sticking me in his will. And real or not, there was no way I was going to blow it.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Tackaberry, sir," I say, "it surely is what I would expect of a disciple of our Lord at this time of year, sir." I'm so damn polite, you'd think I had a teacup up my ass.

Then he says, "And that is precisely the reason I am bequeathing you this tidy sum, my son. I was Bartholomew, you know?"

"Yes, sir, I know." Everybody knew. Back then, at least. Once the history rats confirmed Tackaberry's claims, the story kept the locals buzzing for a good week. Legit icons were few and far between in these parts. Especially those fluent in gibberish or Aramaic, as they called it. Yeah, the Biblers had a new hero, all right. Tackaberry got kissed on the toes so often, he went through three pairs of Hush Puppies before Easter, when he made the switch to Birkenstocks. Then he got some kind of foot disease from a Bibler with herpes or something, and his toenails turned this beefy purple — like he'd been kicking through blueberries. He was back in Hush Puppies real quick, two sizes larger too, because of the scabs and swelling.

Sure, I admit, the three hundred grand was on my mind whenever the guy showed, but I never figured on collecting. Not once. That was the first thing I told the cops. The cops back then, I mean.

Tackaberry strolls in just after lunch, same as always, radiating benevolence like some customers throw off yesterday's sauerkraut. But no sooner do I harness him in, the geek up and blows a hole through the part of his body where some big mass of inoperable crud had strung down roots. Trouble was, he also blew a hole through the thoracic plate on Retropod Nine — a spanking new *DeepDrifter* model yet. But here comes the clincher: Hadley lays it on me, makes me fork over my entire inheritance to replace it. "Your shift, Stark, your responsibility," he says. "Consider yourself fortunate I don't dock you for the overage."

Come summer, the prick switches me to nights and transfers me out of the burbs to the core. The heart of freakin' Freakville, for freak sakes. Temporary, he says. Yeah. Right. And though I thought it to be the worst thing that ever happened, I now know it to have been the best. Because five years later Sam throws me her curve. And just like the Tackaberry deal, I don't see it coming for a second.

I take my break around nine-thirty, just before Sherky screws off at ten. Crowds tend to be thinning out by then and it's not like I can't handle

it alone, even if it stays busy. Sherky comes by his name honestly, if you know what I mean. Still, the guy thinks he's management material.

I take my usual stool and Sam sets down my coffee and pie, same as she's done for the last four months. I love girls with guy names, but that's not the only reason I got it bad for her. I mean, you've seen her eyes. The photos, anyhow. And, well, the rest of her wasn't too shabby either. Mostly, though, she's just plain nice. The decent sort. Sweet. But not so sweet she's not what every flaming heterosexual male would want. Yeah, sooner or later, you can be sure I would have taken her home to Mom.

The pie is raspberry. Fresh raspberries too. None of that phony red goo. "You look tired, Nate," Sam says, topping up my coffee, though I haven't touched it.

"Been one of those nights." I groan to stress my point. "Closest any customer has been to normal is nearly."

"No different than here then." She smiles, as she scopes out a threesome doing the dirty pretzel dance in the booth behind me.

"Oh, there's a difference," I tell her, "trust me. When people get cranky over a cheese sandwich, that's one thing. But you haven't seen anything till you've seen a soul searcher get cranky over a past life."

She eggs me on, so I unwind. Give her the highlights of the way it's gone so far. The preppy. The old fart. The punk.

She pats my hand. "Poor you." God, if a woman's touch were ever therapeutic, it was Sam's. She tops up my coffee and, this time, I need it. Then, kind of hesitant, she says, "Your invitation, is it still good, Nate? You weren't teasing, were you?"

"Oh, jeez!" I catch on right away. "I forgot — your birthday...." Dumb way to make headway in a relationship, I tell you.

"Last Tuesday," she says. "I didn't mention it, you looked so tired...."

"I always look tired."

"I know, but...."

"Twenty-one, right?"

"Uh-huh. And six days."

"You're legal now," I tell her. "Sure, the invitation stands. Come on over. All the regression you want, on the house. Gratis." Really, it was that simple. No fireworks. No chorus of angels singing in harmony. No inkling whatsoever of what was coming down.

Sam is jumping out of her skin; there's no way her smile can be any bigger. "I'm so excited, I can't believe it. I've been waiting forever to find out who I am."

"Well, I hope you already know that," I say, making a big display of my wisdom. "What you're going to learn is who you've been."

She giggled up a storm and out came those dimples. Great dimples, I tell you. *God, I loved this woman.* Should've skipped the retropod and grabbed her up right then and there. Instead, I gave silent thanks to Chaudhary and Ostheim. Chaudhary proved the existence of the human soul, Ostheim isolated it, and some forty years after the fact, Stark was taking full advantage with what had to be the greatest pickup line ever: *Come on over. All the regression you want, on the house.* It never failed. Not once.

Sam turns up just after midnight. "I hope you're hungry," she says, and stashes a brown bag under my arm.

I unwrap the package and down a quarter of the club in two bites. The bacon is crisp. The turkey smoky. The mayonnaise generous. Just the way I like it.

"Ketchup?" she asks.

I squirt a packet over the fries.

"Mountain Dew, right?"

I nod, pop the can.

She props her elbows on the counter and takes in the scene. "Never expected you'd be this busy this late."

"Sundays are funny. Some weeks it's packed, others dead." My mouth is full, so I'm not expecting her to make out a word I've said, but she understands everything; the experience of working in a diner, I guess.

"It's the heat. Everybody's cranky. People can't sleep."

"Nah, that's not it. Not here. Come nightfall, we draw the loonies — hot or not. Trouble is, you can't predict when they'll come out to play."

I check the main board to see who's up and who's winding down. All the lights are a go, but most are either into REM Six or skimming nowtime. "Shouldn't be long," I assure her. "We'll have the place to ourselves by one."

The neon blinking on the far wall catches her eye and I know what

she's going to ask before she asks it. "I don't mean to be pushy, Nate, but do you think I might get a tan too?" Her smile is tentative. No doubt she figures I'm an easy mark; she's not wrong. And you can be sure I would have thrown in the tan had I been able.

I explain how the sign should've come down years ago. Hadley's was one of the original Past*Plus* Regression Parlors — there were a bunch of them — but the *Plus* didn't work out. Simultaneous tanning and regressing never caught on. "Of course, immortality was still a novelty back then."

"It's still a novelty to me," she says.

"I'm not saying it's not fun, Sam. Addictive too. You just don't want to let it become an obsession. Some people, I tell you...."

"So who have you been, Nate, besides who you are now?"

Strange, I think, she's never asked before. I'm telling you, she *was* special. I mean, that was the first thing everybody wanted to know when they learned where I worked. Usually I'd bullshit, drop a couple of nondescript lifedocs — nobodies just boring enough to get the conversation moving in another direction. But with Sam, I decided to play straight. After all, if this relationship was going where I hoped, she might as well like me for who I am instead of who I'd been. Or, more correctly, who I hadn't been.

They say the best part about dying is the coming back. But I didn't know, and thought I never might. Truth is, the only past I'd come up with began and ended in this Nathan Stark lifedoc. Fifteen centuries of nothing, and counting. I'd accepted it. Almost. What was my choice? Make the most of life in life and hope for the best in death. I'd tried the pods a thousand times or more, but all I got was a sea of static. It was deep and blue, but static all the same. Chances were, I'd try another thousand before I gave up altogether. And probably another thousand after that. Hadley might have been tight with a buck, but he was real decent about letting staffers regress. After hours, of course. It was a perk of the job. The only perk. And, truth be told, the only reason I hung around, besides the money covering rent and three squares a day. And a guy never knew when another LWT like Tackaberry might come through the door and leave you three hundred grand or so, even on the night shift — even way down here in freakin' Freakville. *So who have I been besides who I am now, she wants to know.* I shrug, confess: "Nobody."

She's not sure how to react. "Oh." She looks down, embarrassed for me. Not a good sign. "How awful for you."

I try to put her at ease, retrieve my lost prestige. "Hey, I'm used to it. It was upsetting at first. Like you can't help but wonder if you're a first-timer or a one-shotter. Like is this the beginning or the end? And when you see some of the scumbags around here with multiple lives.... But, as my father used to say, 'Nobody ever said Death is fair.' And so you just sort of come to accept it. I mean, when you really get down to it, Sam, whether you got a bunch of lifedocs or one, you still got to live in the here and now."

She kisses my cheek.

"What was that for?"

"For you," she says. "For the here and now." A good sign, I think.

LIKE I EXPECTED, the place is pretty much cleared by one. A couple of uptowners hang back, pushing me to run retrocheks on them. *Why the hell they come to Hadley's is beyond me; for sure their neighborhood has fancier parlors than this.* The woman is claiming she's a Dionne quint — whatever that's supposed to be — and the guy says he's somebody named Benjamin Disraeli. He sees I've drawn a blank and feels the need to clarify. "Earl of Beaconsfield. Prime Minister. Beloved confidante of Victoria, Queen of Great Britain and Ireland, Empress of India...." *Blah blah blah blah.*

"Yeah. Right." Seems everybody has to have a Somebody in their lives. I scribble the details and fire off the retrocheks. "Might be a while," I tell them. I take their money, but neglect to mention how the backlog for a Certificate of Past Life Authentication has stretched to over a year. "Yup, might be a while."

"I'm not concerned," the guy says. "My Marcus Fabius Quintilianus and Khalid ibn Abd al-Aziz came back positive and, most assuredly, my Disraeli shall achieve the same."

I do my best to act impressed, like I'm supposed to know every damn big shot on the planet who's ever croaked. I'm more up on American history, especially the pop culture stuff. Like if he said he was Rudy Vallee or Kurt Cobain, I'd be excited.

"Would you know, perhaps, if any of my sisters have turned up in domains elsewhere?" the woman asks.

I stifle a yawn. "No idea, ma'am."

"Well, if they do, be sure to tell them I was here."

I shuttle the pair out the door, lock up, switch off the outside neon, and Sam and I are alone at long last.

I set her up in Retropod Four. "So smooth, you won't even know the chip is in."

"I'm nervous," she says, "somewhere between utterly terrified and utterly excited."

"Utterly natural," I assure her. "All that'll be behind you the second you start diving. Trust me."

"I do," she says. And this time it's my turn to kiss her. I bypass the cheek in favor of her mouth, and the way she returns the favor has me doing all I can not to jump into the pod with her. Okay, I was either falling in love or already there; does it matter which?

"What will you do while I'm under?" she asks.

I'm all moony-faced; I can feel it in my eyeballs. "Don't worry about me. Just go ahead and have fun. I'll be here when you surface. Have a good life or two, Sam."

"I'll do my best, Nate," she says.

I'm tempted to kill time with a quickie regression while Sam's off on hers, but decide not to risk it; you never know when a retrorookie might implode over an unwelcome life. A couple of years before, I had two victims of this Chelmniecki Massacre thing turn up in the same week; it got real messy, I can tell you. Trouble is, everybody jumps into the pods bubbling with optimism, hearts set on being kings and queens or some other highfalutin variation on Cleopatra, but 99.99999999% dig up nothing more than perpetual nobodyhood—peasants, serfs, plebes, pukes and fodder, from life-one to life-now. Because that's what 99.99999999% of humanity has always been. And that, I suppose, is what keeps them coming back to Hadley's. What'd the boss once say? "The emptier their lifedocs, the fuller my cashbox?" *Something like that, anyhow.* Like I said, it all came down to the fact that everybody needs to be a Somebody. I didn't figure on Sam being any different; I just hoped she wasn't the type to wig out over being in that 99.99999999%.

* * *

An hour in, Sam's winging through REM Six and five minutes later she's skimming nowtime. I tally up the cash and finish up in time to greet her.

She's crying with excitement, so much gushing, I'm eyeing the mop propped in the corner. "The feeling," she's telling me. "The feeling. It's so...so...so liberating." Next I know, she's hugging me tight and painting my face with kisses. "Thank you, thank you, thank you.... Oh, thank you. Nate. Thank you. That was the best birthday gift ever."

"My pleasure," I say, giving thanks to Chaudhary and Ostheim, yet again. "I'm happy it worked out for you." Naturally, I'm curious about her lifedocs, but I'm playing it cool. I don't want to come on like some nosy ass, even if all signs point to our being in the sack together by sunup. I mean, it's the soul searcher's decision whether or not to share past lives, after all. Basic etiquette.

"You won't believe who I am," she says.

"I know who you are." I pull her close, give her a hug and kiss.

Sure enough, out come the giggles and the dimples. She was really something special, I tell you. "Jesus!" she says.

I'm a bit taken aback. I'd never heard her curse before, after all. And though I don't claim to be the world's greatest kisser, I'd never had a woman complain because of it. "Was it that bad?" I ask.

"No, no. Jesus," she says. "You know, of Nazareth. That's who I am. I'm Jesus."

"Right." She's pulling my leg. Still, I tell her point-blank. I mean, this is dangerous territory she's treading in. "You can't be Jesus, so just calm down now. You can be anybody, but you can't be Jesus, okay? It's easy to get confused. Maybe you were a disciple. There was once this guy who came in here, this Mr. Tackaberry, and he turned out to be Bartholomew...."

"But I am Jesus. Honest, Nate. Run one of those checks on me. You'll see."

I try to reason with her. "If I do, they'll come after you so fast you won't know what hit you. Nobody can be Jesus. Even if you are Jesus you can't be Jesus." I tear the poster off the bulletin board and hold it up for her to see. "Look. Look at this list. Who's at the top?"

"Me," she says.

"No, Sam. No. Come on now, read it. Who's at the top?"

She's not happy. "Jesus."

"Right. And what's it say up here?"

"'The Dead No One Can Be.'"

"Right. And what does it say down here?"

"'Report offenders immediately.'"

"Now do you understand what I'm trying to tell you?"

"Siddhartha."

"What?"

"The Buddha. I'm also Siddhartha Gautama; The Buddha."

I skim down the list. *Shit!* This Gautama guy is number six. I mean, what's she trying to pull? "You're not funny." I search her face for the slightest trace of mischief, a twinkle in her eye or something.

"I'm not trying to be funny, Nate. You've got to believe me. I am Jesus and I am The Buddha."

I take her by the shoulders. Not roughly or anything, but firm enough to make it clear I mean business. I look her right in the eyes — those big, beautiful eyes. "You are Sam, the waitress. Period. You got that?" After all my flirting and whatnot, I realize I still don't know her last name. Unlike mine, her nametag doesn't tell the whole story.

Then she comes out with, "Muhammad."

"Stop," I tell her.

"No, honest. Muhammad."

Hell, he's number three on the list, right after this L. Ron Hubbard guy. And out of nowhere, it dawns on me. I crack right up. *What a dope!* "I get it. I get it. Okay, okay." She's got a terrific sense of humor, but I never expected she'd pull one over on me this good. Sherky always complained how I took my job too seriously. I run down the list. "And I suppose you're Abraham, Confucius, and Adolf Hitler too?" I'm laughing.

"I am certainly not Hitler, thank you. At least, not yet. As for the others, how did you know? Mind you, I much prefer K'ung-Fu-tzu to Confucius, the Christian appellation."

All right, time to stop fooling around. I wave the poster like it's my battle flag. "For crying out loud, you're claiming to be everybody you can't be. And on your first dive. Why not throw in Napoleon and Mao and Osama and Attila and Genghis Khan and Mary and Joseph too? Or John Lennon or Elvis, for crying out loud? Or Cleopatra? Why not Cleopatra? Every second nut-job is Cleopatra."

"Because, Nathan, I am none of them. If I were, I would have had to have been living two or three lives at once. And even I know a soul can occupy only one body at a given...."

"Stop. Just stop."

"Why are you behaving this way? Do you know how much I have learned — how much I have to share with the world? It is as if I've been reborn after twenty-one years. And it's only the beginning. Imagine who else I am. I want to go back. I want to go back right now."

"You're not going anywhere."

"What are you talking about?"

I do my best to level with her. "Look, if you claimed to be Jesus, alone, I'd be obligated to turn you in. It's the law. But I like you, Sam, I like you a lot; you know that. So, maybe, if you keep it to yourself, I can let it pass. You know, chalk it up to retrorookie hysteria or something. But bringing all these other lifedocs into it.... I mean, you're putting me in a real awkward position here."

"But I am telling you the truth."

"Truth doesn't mean a thing; only the law matters. You just can't claim to be all those lives."

"Why?"

"Because."

"I know what I experienced, Nathan."

"Right. Jesus and Muhammad sharing the same soul. And some other Jewish guy too. Come on, get off it."

"It would appear my soul harbors a singular aptitude for developing and conveying complex systems of belief, not to mention the gift of gab. What can I say? Do you expect me to deny who I am?"

"Yeah, I do. Jesus, weren't you anybody normal?"

"Not that I recall. Except, I guess, for who I am now. And perhaps even this may be about to change. Since I was little, I've known there was more inside of me, that I wasn't only who I appeared to be...." She's pouting. Sexiest pout I'd ever seen. Talk about lousy timing. "Run those checks on me. You'll see. I can read Sanskrit. And German.... Did I mention I was Moses?"

"For God's sakes, listen. All your lifedocs can come back authentic and they'll still lock you up. Don't you get it? Some dead you just can't be. Period. No ifs, ands, or buts about it."

"I don't understand."

"So much for your so-called aptitude for complex systems of belief...."

"Do not doubt me, Nathan. The laws of mankind are hardly complex. They are arbitrary and frivolous, concocted by malfeasantly pious martinets all too eager to subvert and control an apathetic citizenry beset by terminal naïveté."

"Stop calling me Nathan. It's Nate. Plain Nate. And besides, I didn't get a word you just said."

"Put simply: only the laws of the Gods are true laws."

"The Gods? Did you say 'the Gods'?"

"Monotheism has been vastly overstated. I should have been more precise when I first broached the concept."

"What?"

"And that is but a tiny fraction of the knowledge I have to share. You have no idea the extent to which my teachings have been corrupted...."

"See. That's what I've been trying to tell you. Lifedocs like yours are nothing but trouble. They make people think things they don't need to think. Gets them rethinking what they think they already know. No matter what anybody says, nobody wants another Jesus or Buddha running around. Not even the flake-a-zoids who live and breathe the stuff. In their hearts maybe — yeah — but not in their heads. Anything anybody ever believed in would be shot to hell."

"Hell comes in many flavors."

"Again. That's exactly what I mean."

"Well, it does."

"It doesn't matter. You've got to keep your lives to yourself. Christ, you're some kind of fluke record-holder, I tell you — all those lives wrapped into one soul. Jesus and Buddha. Who else did you say — Muhammad?"

"K'ung-Fu-tzu. Abraham. Moses. And, oh yes! Joseph Smith."

I should've turned her in. Instead, I walked her home. She was pretty adamant about coming out, telling the world who she'd been and all the new stuff she had to share — revelations, insights, and assorted whatnot. I told her to keep her voice down too many times to count. The streets

might look deserted at that hour, but you never know who's listening. Her biggest dilemma was where to begin, which lifedoc was most likely to pave the way for all the others.

I advised her best I knew. "You've got to promise me you'll keep your mouth shut about this."

"And if I don't?"

"They'll put you away."

"And then?"

"I don't know. Nobody does."

"I am not afraid. I am accustomed to persecution."

"I have no doubt."

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

"What?"

"Something I once said."

"Well, do you promise?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"It depends on you...."

A coy Jesus wasn't anything I'd figured on. "Yeah? What?"

"Tomorrow night, after I get off work, you'll let me go again."

"No way. Not after — "

She rose to her tiptoes, pressed her lips against mine, and just sort of hung there, my arms and mouth pretty much keeping her suspended. "Promise. Promise you'll let me," she kept saying. And finally I did.

How she dug out her keys and unlocked her door I do not know. All I'm going to tell you is we didn't let go the whole night long.

SHOULD *THE LIFE OF SAM* ever come to be written, take note: if Nate Stark isn't front and center as a major prophet, apostle, brethren, or whatever they call the key guys, chalk up the job as bogus. Because after my performance, Sam was up to her ears in revelations. I don't mean to boast, but I took her places no man had taken her before, believe you me. Well, no mortal man, anyhow. And no man in her current lifedoc. Yeah, I might have been slow on the draw — it took me four months to get this far, after all — but it was clear that pacing myself was more than worth it.

Best of all, I learned her full name, and there was nothing apocalyptic about it. Samantha Andrea Wallis.

Yeah. My girlfriend, Jesus.

Monday night is dead. Just as well, seeing how little I'd slept. Most who wander in are grungies from the area, clutching HALF-LIFE MONDAY coupons in bony fists: *Wow! A 1-hour regression for the price of a half-hour!* Hadley's failed plan to jumpstart the week. Maybe it worked in the burbs, but not in the core. Here, Mondays belong to the bars. Happy Hour from five to five — you just can't beat it.

Anyhow, I've barely punched in when Hadley drops by to collect the daytime receipts. Asks if I'm still a nobody. I nod and he gives me that phlegmy laugh of his: "Was that you doing a freebie on Four last night?"

"Yeah," I lie. As usual, he's been snooping through the logs. The logs, of course, provide only a rough picture of the dive; the specifics are left to the history rats, should there be cause to dig deeper.

"Well, there's your problem, Stark. You surf like a retrorookie — here, there, everywhere. What did you cover — six, seven thousand years in the session?"

"I guess."

"You'll never get a life at that rate, son. Go decade by decade. Or focus on the big pops — your Indias, your Chinas. Everybody has a lifedoc from one of them. I've got two or three myself, though you'd never know it from my Hindi and Mandarin."

I tell him I'll give it a try, but fact is, he's got me wondering about Sam. *Had she come up empty*? Was that what her crazy claims were all about? Had she been too ashamed to tell the truth, blurting out the first lifedocs that came to mind instead? She'd hardly be the first to have lied about the past — or lack thereof. Like I said, nobody wants to be a nobody. Especially nobodies.

I take my break. Eat my pie. Apple. Sam gives me an extra big slice, but other than that, she acts same as always. No hint of anything from the night before, except her rosy cheeks, slinky grin, and parting words: "So I'll see you later then, Nate — as promised?"

She's wearing her hair in a ponytail. Another of my weaknesses.

* * *

This time, I set her up in Retropod Eleven — an old *LifeLiner*. It may not have all the bells and whistles or the speed of a *DeepDrifter*, but there's no questioning its reliability. If you've got any past life at all, Eleven will deliver.

Sam emerges subdued, with none of the enthusiasm from the night before. The color is gone from her cheeks.

"Was it that bad?" I ask, without pushing too hard. "Look, I know what it's like to come up empty. I'm here for you."

She pretty much snaps my head off. "Is that what you think — that I've come up empty?"

"Well, I — uh — "

"Have you heard of Baha'u'llah? Or Zoroaster?"

I glance over to the wall and the poster, looking for names that come close to what I think she just said. I am relieved to find none. No Baha. No Lulu. No Zorro. No Aster.

"It would seem I am also the soul responsible for Baha'i and Zoroastrianism."

"And these guys are like Jesus and Moses and the others?" I'm trying, but I can't shake my doubt. I mean, how many religious bigwigs can one body be?

"There's something else," she says.

"Tell me."

She shakes her head.

"But you've told me everything...."

"This is different."

"What? So you're Hitler, after all? Is that it?" Okay, so maybe being funny wasn't the best strategy just then, mostly since, I guess, it wasn't all that funny.

"No, I am not Hitler or anyone like him. But it might be better if I were."

"Then what? Tell me. You can trust me." Actually, I'm not entirely convinced she can. I worry I might turn her in if she starts stirring up too much trouble. I hoped I wouldn't, of course, but you never know until the chips are down.

"I need to go again."

"Sam...."

"Now. Tonight. But on a different machine."

"Look, if you're coming up empty...."

"I told you, I am not. When you doubt, I prefer you abstain."

"Huh?"

"Sorry. Zarathustra speaking."

"What?"

"Nothing. Look, Nathan — Nate — I need to do this. Please. More than you can imagine. I need to." She raises the shield on Retropod Three and starts to climb in. To make matters worse, I help her. Harness her in. Adjust the chip. Yeah, the whole stupid, dumb-ass, criminal nine yards.

Anyhow, it went on like this for hours. She'd go into a dive and come up fifteen, twenty minutes later, looking glum as rain. And then she'd hop right into another machine. Didn't even bother asking anymore. She just assumed I'd set her up and get her going, which, I guess, is what I did. I'd never seen anything like it. Most soul searchers are whipped after an hour and I'd never once seen anybody go longer than two — I mean, a person can handle only so many past lives at a time, and once you reach your threshold, the brain shorts out or something. Hadley called it the three-hundred-faces-of-Eve syndrome; he chuckled every time he said it, but I didn't have a clue why. Anyhow, to put it mildly, Sam was driven. By sunup she'd been into and out of every retropod in the place at least twice. Man, what I would have given to see Hadley's face when he tried to make sense of the logs for that night.

We're in Calv's, pretty much the scuzziest diner in the neighborhood. The place is so dark and dreary, you'd think it was the dead of night instead of the break of day. The décor is your classic dinge with a soupçon of yesterday's sewer rat. On the upside, the aroma of bacon and coffee washes over us, and suddenly I realize how hungry I am. More hungry than tired, though tired enough.

Now this isn't the diner where Sam waits tables, which, by comparison, is the frigging Ritz. Nope, Calv's is that spectacular establishment under the El near Twenty-first Street. Sam figured it'd give us some privacy, that we'd be the only sober folk in the joint. She was right. Pretty

much every other customer is sleeping it off, the snoring and wheezing a language unto itself. And if I didn't get a fix of caffeine into me real quick, I could see myself joining the conversation.

Still, I ask her if she really wants to stay. "We could go to my place," I tell her. "Or yours." I mean, if it's privacy she wants....

"I can't go home. They may already know about me. They always find out sooner or later."

"Who?"

"The people who don't want me around. It's my history. You know — ridicule, proscription, assassination, crucifixion.... And now they'll have even more reason to rid themselves of me."

I look at her like it's somebody else's head screwed onto her body. "Nobody knows anything. Except when the machines were used and for how long. The history rats won't snoop unless you start making noise or somebody tips them off. Hadley won't bother. He thinks it's me who's been going at it."

"Somebody will." Her tone fell just short of accusation.

"Are you saying I — "

"I don't know, Nate. But the ones who inevitably betray me are those closest to me."

"But I'd never — "

"I have been the victim of gullibility as often as duplicity. No matter, the result is the same."

I'm thinking I could use a dictionary when the waitress interrupts. "Keep it simple, kids," she says, earring kabobs grazing her boobs, her boobs testing the limits of her buttons. "Willy has ten minutes to go and ain't in no mood to be messin' with hotcakes and omelets."

I go for the bacon and eggs, Sam a carrot muffin. Coffee, too, of course. And plenty of it. The waitress winks and leaves the pot.

"Why do they do that?" I ask. "Why do so many waitresses wink?"

"Tips," she says. "A well-timed wink almost always generates a superior tip."

"You never winked at me."

"I didn't have to. You were a big tipper."

"So?" I say.

"So," she says.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"Are you sure you want to hear?"

I look about for snoops, ears perking up, see none. Most heads remain buried in folded arms. "What could be worse than your being every major religious lifedoc for the last five thousand years?"

"Correction: the last thirty thousand years. And are you sure you really want to know what could be worse?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Are you a religious person, Nate?"

"Last time I set foot in a church was my sister's wedding. And she married some Jewish guy, so it wasn't a church exactly."

"Do you believe in Jesus?"

"I suppose. Whether he was really the son of God, I mean.... Well, who can say? Except you, maybe."

"So you're not sure about Jesus, but you do believe in God then?"

"I'm wishy-washy on Him too. Sometimes, I guess. I'd like to. I don't know. It's tough. He's not exactly what you'd call a great communicator these days."

"If, indeed, he ever was."

"What? What do you mean by that?" I lower my voice. "You are Jesus and Moses and all those other guys He was always speaking to — you are, aren't you?"

"Yes. And many others too. My lifedocs include just about every individual who led or inspired any sort of religious movement since the dawn of man."

"What — you're Adam and Eve too?"

"My earliest is a woman named R'mu. I lived in a cave in what is now the south of France. Had quite the following, I might add, considering the time and place. Nice cave too, relatively speaking."

"So you're even more of the dead you can't be."

"You have no idea," she says. "But that's not the least of it."

"Oh, that's plenty."

"I may also be the dead that are impossible to be."

"Huh?"

"Have you ever heard of Harry Angstrom?"

"What religion did he start?"

"Or Nausicaa? Or Lady Capulet? Or Bertie Cecil? Norman Mushari? Or how about Ho Hsien-Ku?"

"Bertie Cecil sounds familiar." He didn't really, but I was still working to impress. "Sort of."

"The protagonist of *Under Two Flags*?"

"Oh. Oh, yeah." I've never been a convincing bluffer.

"Goldilocks, then. Surely she rings a bell?"

"The Three Bears' Goldilocks?"

"The same."

"I don't get it."

"Neither do I."

We clam up as the waitress sets our plates before us. "Anything else I can get you kids?"

"Another pot of coffee, maybe?" I've been downing mugs like there's no tomorrow — which for Sam and me, just might be the case.

"Can do, sweetheart."

Sam plucks a raisin from her muffin, examines it to make sure it really is a raisin — this is Calv's, don't forget — and pops it into her mouth. I dip my toast into the yolk. The waitress returns with a fresh pot. "I'm stepping out back for a smoke, so if you kids need anythin', just holler."

I'm an egg and two strips of bacon in before Sam finds the words to continue.

"You see, Nate, last night, when I regressed for the second time...." She raises her mug to her lips and takes a long slow gulp.

"On the old *LifeLiner*. Number Eleven."

"Something funny started to happen."

"Ha-ha funny or oh-shit funny?"

"Remember, when I told you I am Baha'u'llah and Zoroaster?"

"Yeah." I'm still not sure if she's talking two names, four, or two teams of two — like Caesar/Cleopatra or Batman/Robin.

"Well, here's what troubles me: On that same dive, I learned I am also Harry Angstrom."

"He's some bad guy? Is that it?"

"Worse. He's a character from a book — something called *Rabbit Run*."

"Yeah, so?"

"So? So? Don't you get it? Harry Angstrom isn't real. He never lived, except in the pages of John Updike novels. Just like Bertie Cecil. And neither did Nausicaa, Lady Capulet, Norman Mushari or Ho Hsien-Ku. If you've read Homer or Shakespeare or Vonnegut or are in any way familiar with Chinese mythology, you'd know. They're all fictional characters from one era or another, one country or another."

"Like Goldilocks, Jesus."

"Yes, like Goldilocks."

"But that's a fairy tale. I mean, it didn't really happen." Sometimes I'm a tad slow on the draw. "You can't be a fairy tale, Sam."

"Don't you think I know? But according to your retropods, I am — plus several other individuals who never existed. And that's in addition to all the dead you told me I cannot be. That's why I needed to try all the pods. I thought for sure something was wrong. A glitch. A malfunction. But the more I explored my past, the more I discovered. Every machine gave me the same. For every religious icon among my lifedocs, I have a fictional counterpart. But how is this possible? How can I be people who never existed and, at the same time, people who did exist? But do you know what disturbs me most, Nate?"

I swallow, shake my head. I'm scared too, just not sure of what.

"Either they are *all* real or *none* of them are."

"Jesus."

"Yes."

"But nobody can be a fictional character. The retropods, they trace past lives — real lives — not made-up lives."

"Could someone have tampered with Hadley's machines?"

"All of them? At once? I don't see how. But there's an easy way to find out. How much money do you have on you?"

She pulls her wallet from her bag. "Not a lot. Twenty and change. But I've got my bank card."

"No. We need cash. Bank cards are too easy to trace, if it should come to that." I come up with another forty, convinced I am digging my own grave, so to speak.

If you're looking for integrity, state-of-the-art, and all that other gobbledygook, NirvanaLand has the market cornered. It's the reason

you're finding fewer and fewer independents like Hadley's. Anyhow, we head way uptown, as far from Freakville as the El goes. We play it cool, saunter in as if regressing first thing on a summer morning is as natural as scratching. "It's my girlfriend," I tell the clerk, my wink not much different from the waitress at Calv's. "When she gets the urge, she gets the urge." But the guy doesn't much care what I'm saying, his eyes are on Sam. He takes our money and sets her up in a shiny new *PastMaster*. Jesus, the whole place is nothing but *PastMasters*. Top of the line. Praised by *Consumer Reports* and whatnot. Capable of scanning more decades in a minute than most of Hadley's pods can cover in ten. Even the magazines in the waiting zone are recent. But my mind is hardly on reading or even the centerfolds. My only concern is Sam and whether her lifedocs are bogus or legit — and, I guess, if Hadley's pods are the same.

The hour is a long one.

SAM EMERGES with a poker face. Pleasant. Emotionless. As forgettable as a good-looking woman can be. "Still nobody special," she announces to me, loud enough for the clerk to hear. He wishes her better luck next dive and hands her a punch card that offers a free regression after she's paid for five. The sort of promo Hadley should try.

We are well away from the place, at rest on a bench in that solitary patch of green on the boulevard at Eighty-eighth and Eleventh, before she opens up. Traffic stops and goes on either side. The morning rush. Bumper to bumper, north and south. The heat, beginning its rise from pavement, is up to knee level. I cannot say why, but I feel more removed from the scene than a part — as if Sam and I and the bench and the green are the image on the missing piece of a massive jigsaw. "The result," she says, "it was the same, Nate." I get a sense she's striving to come off low-key, to spare my feelings or something. Beneath the surface she seems excited, exhilarated even.

"So there's nothing wrong with Hadley's pods?"

"No."

"Who were you this time?" I brace for the worst, without a clue as to what the worst might be.

"Iola Morton, Marduk, and Rishabha."

"Iola Morton, eh?" I say, as if I know who the hell she's come up with

now. But my ignorance quickly gives way to curiosity. "Are any of them — you know — real?"

"Real? By your definition, Rishabha alone would qualify. In his person, I am the first of the twenty-four Tirthankaras in the present age of decline in the heterodoxy of Jainism."

"Huh?" With every dive she grows smarter, while I grow dumber. I can feel the brain cells draining from my ears. It's like I'm a student in a remedial English-as-a-second-language class. No longer can I picture Sam in an apron, asking if I'd care for a scoop of vanilla with my pie.

"Iola Morton appears in several books for young readers — a popular twentieth-century mystery series called *The Hardy Boys* — while Marduk is the hero of the Babylonian epic, *Enuma Elish*."

"I don't get it."

"Neither did I," she says. "Until now. The thing is, Nate, all my lifedocs are real."

"But you just said...."

"And all my lifedocs are fiction. It just depends on which side of the divide you stand."

She has barely begun to explain and I am lost. I zero in on the obvious. "You're saying Jesus is fiction, then?" I'm edgy as hell, expecting the history rats to pull up curbside at any moment.

"As the lives I've led attest, my soul has always possessed a proclivity for revelation. It is about to demonstrate the same again. You have a choice, Nathan: You may leave me now and distance yourself as best you can, or you may hear me out and suffer the consequences that will assuredly ensue."

I didn't want to know anything more. She was scaring the crap out of me. All I wanted was to have the old Sam back. The club sandwich and Mountain Dew Sam. The ponytail Sam. The woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with Sam. No, I didn't want another word about Jesus or Iola Morton or Goldilocks. So I can't for the life of me tell you why I said, "I want to know. I've always been big on epiphany." Frankly, I wasn't sure what *epiphany* meant — don't think I'd ever used it in public before — but it struck me as a word she'd appreciate.

"We have always been taught that the retropods plot the travels and travails of the human soul upon this Earth, correct?"

"Yeah, sounds right."

"But what the pod creators — and we as mankind — have failed to grasp is that the journey a soul takes may extend beyond this Earth."

Jesus, where was this leading? Could some lifedocs be Martians?

"Notwithstanding those so-called fringe elements among us, mainstream divinity confines the physical manifestation of the soul to this world, this one dimension. But in practice, our soul traverses time and space, passing from one dimension to another, from one corporeal entity to the next. This accounts for the gaps in so many peoples' earthly timelines. Their souls have been elsewhere."

"But somebody would have noticed this before — all the soul searchers out there?"

"Experience is one thing, comprehension quite another. I am afraid, once again, enlightenment is left to me. I was the first to preach polytheism. The first to preach monotheism. The first to talk with a burning bush. The first to walk on water. By comparison, revealing the true nature of our souls will be a piece of cake."

"They won't let you get away with it. I've told you, there's some dead they just won't let you be."

"I know. If not I, another will manage to spread my word. Someone always does."

"But this time there'll be no word to spread. You can't be both fact and fiction. No one will believe you — or in you."

"On the contrary, the two are fundamental to my message. Do you have imagination, Nathan?"

"Of course. Who doesn't?" *Where the hell was she going now?*

"You'd be surprised." She smiles and I yearn for her — and for what we had even more. "Imagination is not what you think it is — not what anyone thinks it is. For the most part, imagination is your soul's recall of past lives and encounters. And no matter how outrageous the thoughts that enter your head, how sublime or horrific — from genies granting wishes to monsters crushing cars in downtown Tokyo — each is based on a reality of a past life lived not necessarily in this dimension, but in some other."

Jesus. Goosebumps sprouted the full length of my arms. I was starting to believe her. *Hell, I wanted to believe her.* "Then I'm not a one-shotter?"

"In this dimension, probably yes. Nathan Stark may well be your first venture onto this particular plain. Chances are, your soul has spent most of its existence elsewhere. But do you want to know the most intriguing anomaly of all?"

She wasn't looking for an answer; still, I gave her one. "Yes."

"Jesus, Muhammad, Moses, Hubbard, and all the others we accept as historical and spiritual reality upon this Earth are the fictions of other dimensions — the beasts under the bed, so to speak. And Goldilocks, Iola Morton, Lady Capulet, Bertie Cecil and all the others we accept as fiction in the here and now have existed as living, breathing entities elsewhere."

"No way. That would make Dracula and Spider-Man and Lara Croft — they'd all be real too somewhere."

"Hell exists as surely as Heaven. Zeus exists as surely as Jehovah."

"This is crazy. If I follow what you're saying, somewhere out there, I'm a character in a story too?"

"You will be, yes. After you die and your soul passes on, Nathan Stark will enter the realm of fiction — a remnant of a past life reanimated as an imaginary life. It may be in a book, a comic, a film, a digital pastime, or a play. In dimensions less sophisticated, perhaps even oral tradition. My particular soul just happens to be literary in nature. Yours may well be more inclined to multimedia."

"You're serious?"

"I have told you exactly as it has been revealed to me. The life you lead in one dimension becomes the stuff of fiction in the next."

"Jesus."

"I truly wish you would stop using my name in vain, Nathan."

"And I wish you wouldn't call me Nathan."

We laughed for the first time in hours and then we just sort of sat there, hand in hand, with nothing more to say. The words that finally broke the silence were mine. And it wasn't along the lines of anything I usually said to girlfriends: "I'm not sure how to tell you this, Sam, but you've made me feel really good. You've given me hope that there's more to me than this."

"That's what I do," she said. "It is what I have always done."

* * *

They came for me that night. Sherky's doings more than Hadley's, so it seemed to me. Like he didn't act one bit surprised when they stormed in. And though I tried to take the fall, claim Jesus and the others as lives of my own — swear to God I did — I gave her up. I couldn't help it. The history rats have their ways. And it wasn't like they didn't know all along who she was or where to find her. I was what they called their insurance.

I got seven years. You know, aiding and abetting a soul searcher in the commission of an illicit lifedoc. Made it out in four. But the worst part was, I was banned from the retropods for life. This life, anyhow. Not even allowed to work in the industry, the only business I knew. But I guess it wasn't all that big a deal, not after you consider what happened to Sam.

Samantha Andrea Wallis. My Sam. She got — well, who the hell really knows? They just put her away — shut her up good — and then one day some guy plants a shiv between her ribs. That was the word on the street anyhow. Some scummy named Wray Erling Dreng who'd had it in not for her, but for me — all because I'd once thrown him out of Hadley's Past*Plus* Regression Parlor in the heart of freakin' Freakville.

Unless you're lying on your deathbed or slipping into a noose, I don't suppose you're likely to grasp you're speaking your last words when you come to speak them. That's how it was with Sam and me. Well, maybe She knew it was to be our last conversation, but I sure didn't. It was after the bench and patch of green on the boulevard and we'd come back down to the core. She said, "Maybe, someday, you'll be the one to write about me. Imagine, the Gospel of Natha — Nate."

I laughed. "Gee, I don't know," I told Her. "I've never fancied myself as a writer. Not in this Nathan Stark lifedoc, anyhow. Maybe I'll just leave it to my next life."

We kissed and I gave Her the key to my place. "See you later then," She said. And to this day, I have no doubt She'll keep the promise. By my reckoning, it will be Her 372nd coming. Or His, I guess, if that's how life works out.





FILMS

KATHI MAIO

PLASTIC, AND PROUD OF IT!

AT THE END of the year, all those serious, self-satisfied movies designed to win "Best Picture" Oscars always come out. However, all is not lost. Because — since the tykes of America need to be kept out from underfoot while last-minute holiday preparations are made — it is also a time when many of the more light-hearted, kid-friendly, entertainment-only pictures are released. These family films are often heavily infused with fantasy and sf elements, but usually have much less hyper-violence and general coarseness attached to their story-telling than most "grown-up" fantasy films.

Okay, some of them (SpongeBob, anyone?) seem obsessed with getting cheap laughs from body emissions and slapstick, but at least their stories aren't completely dependent on human grotesquery, non-stop explosions, high-tech weaponry, or legions of CGI warriors slaughtering one another.

Which is not to say that CGI has been overlooked. In fact, two of the family films of late 2004 were computer animation start to finish. Neither opted for chatty critters, dynamic toys, or lovable monsters — the types of imaginary life forms that have, from *Toy Story 1* (1995) to *Shrek 2* (2004), made believers of even the most skeptical computer animation viewers. Both *The Polar Express* and *The Incredibles* tried, in fact, to take computer "humanimation" to the next level. But although both nobly pushed the envelope of realism in the portrayal of human characters through computerized animation, only one truly succeeds as motion picture entertainment.

The Polar Express is, perhaps,

the more ambitious film. Based on the greatly loved children's story by author and artist Chris Van Allsburg, the movie adaptation was co-written and directed by a man who knows a thing or two about melding fantasy to realism in film. Robert Zemeckis, who directed the likes of the *Back to the Future* trilogy, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, *Death Becomes Her*, *Forrest Gump*, and *Contact*, would seem to have been born for the challenge. Zemeckis has a talent for both technological innovation and heartfelt storytelling, so if anyone could have transformed Van Allsburg's story about a young boy's magical trip to see Santa at the North Pole, it should have been Zemeckis.

But the technology was not quite up to the challenge of Mr. Zemeckis's vision.

It has been reported that Mr. Van Allsburg vetoed a traditional cartoon adaptation when he sold the movie rights to his story. And the logistics of a live-action story using real trains and live child actors (who would grow too quickly for the long production needed) also seemed impracticable. So, Zemeckis and his built-in star and executive producer, Tom Hanks, instead convinced the book's author that the best plan would be to use "performance capture" to transform human actors into computer animation.

The technique had been used successfully by other filmmakers to bring the non-human (e.g., Jar Jar Binks of *Star Wars* fame) and the semi-human (*LOTR*'s Gollum) into live-action films of note. But this is the first time a cast of completely human characters was created in computers to populate a computer-generated landscape.

In these days of an exhausting array of "The Making of..." puff documentaries and relentless gee-whiz promotions, there are probably only a handful of people who don't know something about how Mr. Zemeckis and his cohorts photographed live actors wearing countless reflective do-dads, to "capture" their expressions and movements and then convert them into CGI. But despite the hype, techniques don't matter unless you're a film student. Movie magic isn't about the how-tos. What matters is whether filmmakers can make their audiences really believe in their films.

And, ironically, in a movie with a message that can literally be summed up in the word "believe," it was impossible for me to ever give myself over to the story of *The Polar Express*, or let myself be

enchanted by its gentle Christmas fantasy.

I could set aside the ego-tripping of star Tom Hanks, who plays not one but four roles — the boy hero, a ghost hobo, the train conductor, and even old St. Nick himself — in the movie. (Hey Tom, leave a little work for the other members of SAG, will ya?) And I was also more than willing to make certain allowances for the way the storyline was complicated and inflated so as to fill a feature film. For me, the key problem with *The Polar Express* was simply its unsettling and eerie computer-generated look.

The people, most especially the children, who wander through this cybernetic wonderland are like something from *Night of the Living Dead*. Their skin tones are dull and cold, their teeth are gray, and their eyes seem perpetually crossed, like they've had too much eggnog and then some. Their affect is curiously flat, even in the most adventurous or frightening scene, and they never truly seem to connect with each other emotionally.

The plotting of the film doesn't ameliorate this tendency, either. The nameless children who join our nameless young hero on his trip are all stock stereotypes, from the smart brat to the feisty black girl. Most disturbing of all is the way a tacked-onto-the-plot poor boy is portrayed as an isolated minority (as if the majority of the kids on this Earth weren't poor and Christmasless), who sees himself as a shame-filled pariah. As the story goes, one child is picked by Santa as deserving the first gift of Christmas. Wouldn't a saintly benefactor seek out just such an impoverished child for special care and attention? Not in this movie. Santa picks a middle-class child who already has a wealth of presents under his tree at home. And to add insult to his indigence, the poor boy is told that the greatest gift he can hope for is friendship. (Tell that to the rich kid, Santa!)

Besides being a little lacking in the true spirit of holiday, the film's Kris Kringle appears neither round nor jolly nor warm. And even his prancing reindeer seem devoid of personality!

At times, while you watch the movie, you can marvel at the technical brilliance of a shot. But as much as I was wowed by tricks like a virtual tracking shot that moved through a frosty window into a room interior or scenes in which first wolves and then caribou gather at the train's tracks, I was never able

to stop looking at the movie as an exercise in computer wizardry.

Released just days before *The Polar Express*, *The Incredibles* is a much different kettle of bits and bytes. It, too, focuses exclusively on human characters — a first for Pixar, the studio that has dominated the computer animation field for a decade by telling tales about objects and animals. But writer-director Brad Bird (who released the brilliant but underappreciated *Iron Giant* in 1999) somehow knew the limits of his medium despite the fact that he came from a traditional drawn animation background. So his characters weren't designed to look like real humans. Instead, they were designed to look like real cartoon characters.

The central protagonist is Mr. Incredible (voiced by Craig T. Nelson), a superhero of the most dedicated variety, who uses his brawn, speed, and other ultra-talents to serve humanity. That is, until litigious savees start suing him for his altruistic acts. Eventually, Mr. I and his bride, the former Elastigirl (Holly Hunter), are sent to live undercover in a ranch home in a bland sixties-style suburbia.

Our hero is now known as Bob Parr, and he toils each day as an insurance adjuster. Still, he can't help himself from saving people. He tells clients whose claims are denied how to win benefits from his heartless company. And on boys' night out, he listens to a police scanner with his old superhero pal, Frozone (Samuel L. Jackson), and saves people on the sly.

Elastigirl, now Helen Parr, has done a better job of suppressing her real super-self. She tries to avoid using her powers, and chastises her two older children, shy pubescent Violet (Sarah Vowell) and mischievous Dash (Spencer Fox) to do the same.

Our Fantastic-Four-like nuclear family lives an approximation of a normal life until Bob loses his job and is drawn into secret work to save the world once more. Or so he thinks. Actually, he is being targeted for destruction by his former "biggest fan," Buddy (Jason Lee), a seriously disturbed geek inventor who now calls himself Syndrome.

The Incredibles is a full-fledged adventure story — and works marvelously as such. But it is also a character-driven tale of considerable warmth and intelligence. I liked the way each Parr's power reflected recognizable gender and age roles, without seeming like stereotypes. Bird purposefully heightened the father figure as one of strength,

while Helen's mother figure is someone who is stretched in a dozen different directions but somehow manages to juggle it all. Violet, living through that adolescent time when young girls seem to lose themselves, has a talent for becoming invisible and creating a self-protecting force field around herself. Dash is an ADHD-ish energetic little boy, with the ability to move so quickly that his teacher can't even see him put the tack on his chair.

Minor support characters are equally noteworthy. Especially fun is a cameo character who is clearly an homage to costuming great Edith Head. But instead of a clothier to Hollywood, Edna Mode is the stylist for superheroes. The diminutive designer produces outfits for the entire Parr clan. And her lecture on the dangers of capes is a delight. Even more so when you realize that the character is being voiced by Mr. Bird himself!

The characters in *The Incredibles* are certainly memorable ones. Well-rounded in both outer self and inner being? Yes. Believable? You bet. But do they look like real humans? Not a chance. The sheen and movement of the hair of Violet is phenomenal. The suppleness of Mr. Incredible's muscles beneath his tights is very impressive. Certainly all the characters in *The Incredibles* are more realistic and multi-dimensional than traditional cartoon characters, but they don't look like actual human beings. Instead, they look like plastic action figures come to life.

It seems an apt compromise between 2-D cell animation and the kind of realism that *The Polar Express* strives to capture, but isn't even close to pulling off.

The Incredibles is a very sophisticated movie. A rip-roaring superhero thriller, it is also a celebration of family that doubles as a not-that-subtle denunciation of a society that tells excellence to stifle itself and seems intent on enforcing mediocrity.

Luckily, there is nothing mediocre about this film. Sadly, the same cannot be said of the ghostly, ghastly *Polar Express*. Someone should tell Mr. Zemeckis not to try so hard to make his CGI look like living, breathing humans. It's okay for a cartoon to look like a cartoon — even when the hero is a man and not a clown fish. Artifice is fine as long as it's superficial. Brad Bird certainly understands this. His *Incredibles* clan is visually "fake," but real (and completely entertaining) in all the ways that really matter.

Matt Hughes introduced us to Henghis Hapthorn, Old Earth's foremost freelance discriminator, in the March 2004 issue. Since then, we've shared several adventures with him and his handy integrator, most recently in our September issue. Here now we see Henghis employed in a manner most unusual—

Finding Sajessarian

By Matthew Hughes

SIGBART SAJESSARIAN CAME to me with an unusual request.

"I want you to find me," he said. He offered a substantial fee.

"There you are," I said, gesturing to where his slim figure reposed upon the visitor's divan in my workroom. "I could never accept such handsome remuneration for so brief an assignment. What do you say we waive it altogether?"

A short but deep vertical shadow appeared between Sajessarian's eyebrows and the skin over his cheeks tightened. I recognized the signs of irritation and was reminded of a recent discussion with the integrator that I had assembled to be my research assistant.

"My wit is often not appreciated by my clients," I had said. "Perhaps it is too subtle."

"Perhaps it is because they come to you in direst need, with weighty matters of life or security hanging by frayed and slender threads," the device said. "That would not lead them to expect facetious banter, nor to welcome its appearance."

I conceded the point. "Still," I said, "a few well-chosen words can lighten the mood."

"Providing they are indeed well chosen," it said, "the test of which would be the client's answering smile or chuckle. But when the reaction is a scowl or blank incomprehension, one might conclude that the witticism is ill placed."

I made a gesture to indicate the inconsequentiality of our discussion. "Some people are impervious to the subtler forms of humor."

"That must be a comforting thought," the integrator said.

Not for the first time, I made a mental note to review my assistant's cognitive architecture. The better grade of integrators were expected to evolve and complexify themselves, and I knew that I had installed a disputatious element in this one's reflective and evaluative functions. But I was beginning to wonder if the components had lapsed out of balance.

I decided I would schedule a full review for the earliest convenient moment, but when that moment might arrive was difficult to foresee. I was, after all, Henghis Hapthorn, Old Earth's most eminent freelance discriminator, and thus in constant demand. Currently I was conducting six discriminations, five involving cases that had baffled the best sleuths of the Archonate's renowned Bureau of Scrutiny. The other concerned an attempt to extort funds and favors from Ogram Fillanny. He was an immensely wealthy member of Olkney's mercantile class who delighted in certain discreditable, juvenile pastimes which could harm only himself — and even then, only if he indulged to gross excess — but were nonetheless unlikely to win him widespread acclaim.

And then in the midst of it all, Sigbart Sajessarian appeared at my premises and requested that I find him. "Perhaps my levity was ill-timed," I said and saw the dark line between his brows fade to a mere crease. "Please tell me more."

He rose from the divan and began to stroll about the workroom in an abstracted manner. "I am, as I'm sure you know, something of an adventurer," he said.

"Indeed," I replied. In truth, I knew that he was a skilled blackmailer and purloiner and that he would probably have poisoned public wells if he could have gained a grimlet from it, but my saying so at this juncture

would truncate our conversation before I could find out where it might lead. And I was curious, so I said, "Indeed" a second time.

"I am engaged," he went on, "in an affair which may outrage certain well-placed parties for a span of time. If they should lay hold of me before the situation matures...." He spread his hands in a motion that invited me to imagine the consequences.

"You wish to remain out of circulation until hot blood has cooled," I said.

"The cold-blooded are more easily reasoned with," he confirmed. "But even during the hot-blooded phase that will naturally follow my intended operation, the aggrieved parties will have the sense to hire the best possible aid in locating me."

I saw where he was going. "Ah," I said, touching a palm to my breast.

"Yes," he said, "they might well send you to find me."

"And you wish to conduct a dry run to see if the course of evasion you have planned will defeat my efforts to uncover your lair."

"Only within the period when I am in danger. I am sure that I could not escape you forever."

He was a practiced flatterer, I knew. But he was also correct.

"I cannot be an accomplice to illegality," I said.

His narrow shoulders rose and fell in a languid shrug. "I believe the more appropriate term is immorality."

"Make your distinction clear."

"Let us say that immorality is a world and illegality but one of its continents, albeit a broad one containing many distinct and fascinating landscapes." He half smiled at some inner conceit. "What I plan to do would fit on an island well offshore."

"Hmm," I said. "I require more detail."

He steepled his fingertips together and thought for a moment, then said, "On behalf of one group of eminent persons I intend to discomfit a member of another group. I can assure you that there will be no loss of life, blood, or wealth, though a reputation will be deservedly diminished."

"Indeed," I said again. This had the odor of an affair among Olkney's decadent aristocracy who, possessing every luxury that Old Earth might offer, chose to salt and season their otherwise placid existence by competing against each other for shaved minims of prestige and precedence.

Players at these social games would mount the most elaborate conspiracies whose only ends were that the victim would not be asked to Lady Whatsoever's spring cotillion or would be seated one chair farther down from the Duke at dinner.

To keep their fingers unsoiled and unscorched, lordly rivals often hired others to perform the mechanics of the plots. From time to time I received delicate approaches from magnates and aristocrats seeking to enlist me in their schemes. I invariably declined. Creatures like Sajessarian made fortunes by accepting.

"I will take the case," I said. "How long a head start will you require?"

"If you would begin to seek for me three days from now, I will have laid my false trails and blind alleys."

"And how long do you need to remain unfound?"

"Let us say three days for that as well."

"Done," I said.

DURING THE ENSUING three days I concluded Ogram Fillanny's business and advanced the progress of three other outstanding cases. I could have achieved more but I will admit that I was distracted by a new pursuit: the being who visited me occasionally from an adjacent dimension had introduced me to a new game which I found fascinating. It irked me slightly that I could not refer to either the game or my visitor by a name, but symbol and being were so inextricably mixed in his continuum that voicing the one materially affected the other. Doing so in my universe would have catastrophic results.

For my own purposes, I had taken to calling the game Will. Its playing pieces were semi-sentient entities that could carry out complex strategies in three dimensions over time if motivated to do so by a focused expenditure of the player's mental energy. The rules were fairly easy to master but the inherent variability of the playing area — one could not call it merely a board — allowed for intricate maneuvers to develop from simple beginnings once one grasped the rhythms by which play ebbed and flowed.

It had taken me a little while, under my opponent's guidance, to develop the faculty of focusing my thoughts on the pieces, especially how

to contemplate a move without causing it to happen before I had definitely decided that that was what I wanted the pieces to do. Now, however, I had achieved what my partner called a modest but promising ability. A few more games, each one followed by a thorough digesting of my defeat at his hands — I use the expression loosely; they were more like the claws a bear would have if a bear were a species of insect — and he promised that I would approximate a good opponent.

I tended to ponder long over each move, whereas he made his with an alacrity that at first frustrated me. In our latest match, however, he had lingered in the portal which gave him limited access to this continuum, assessing the deployment of my pieces for quite some time.

Finally, he said, "You have divided your forces."

"Indeed," I said, exerting the mild effort that kept the pieces where I had willed them.

"What do you think that will achieve?"

"It would be premature to say," I said. "It is your move."

The shifting colors and shapes that filled the portal assumed an orientation that I had come to recognize as his equivalent of a frown of concentration. "Take your time," I added.

He emitted a noise that combined a thoughtful *hmmm* with a rumbling growl and reformed his reserves while launching a cloud of what I called fast-darters into the middle-middle of the playing area. His plods — that is how I thought of the slower, larger pieces — moved heavily in formation into the lower-forefront, waited while the terrain exhibited one of its regular oscillations, then rotated and inched forward once more before stopping at a barrier that emerged from the "ground." The plods then changed color to become two shades lighter.

"Hmm," I said and looked thoughtful, although his move was almost exactly how I had expected him to respond to mine.

"I shall return when you are ready to make your next disposition," he said.

"It may be a while," I told him. "I am about to pursue a discrimination that will almost certainly require me to leave these premises. I may even have to go offworld." I told him briefly about the impending search for Sigbart Sajessarian.

"If you wish," he said, "I can tell you where he is, now or at any

moment in his lifespan." His access to this realm was limited but his perspection of some aspects of it was limitless.

I did not wish him to do so. "We have discussed this," I said. "I value you most highly as a partner in such pursuits as this" — I indicated the game — "because you have largely drained the swamp of boredom in which I long floundered. But my profession is an essential element of my being, and your omniscience threatens to leave me without purpose."

The swirling colors assumed a pattern I recognized as a shrug. "As you wish," he said, "but I am interested to see where your strategy will lead. Perhaps you might take game and portal with you, in case you have an idle hour during the search for Sajessarian."

"I might, at that," I said.

He departed and immediately I turned to my assistant. "Integrator, consider the disposition of the pieces. Note that our opponent blanched his plods by two shades instead of three. Project my ten most likely strategies that I may evaluate them." I had found it easier to let the device present the options; when I envisioned where my pieces might next go I must exercise will to prevent them from drifting in the foreseen directions. The effort could become tiring.

"*Your* opponent," said my assistant.

"I beg your pardon?"

"He is your opponent, not mine," said the device. "I am only your aide."

The correction was technically precise, and I had designed the device to be exacting in its use of language. As we speak, so do we think, after all. Still, I thought to detect a tone that, in a human interlocutor, would have betokened jealousy.

But when I inquired of my assistant if there was anything it wished to discuss regarding my relationship with my transdimensional visitor, it answered my query with a question of its own.

"How could there be?" it said.

"Indeed," I said, though again I noted what would have been a certain frostiness. After a moment, I added, "We must schedule that review of your systems."

"How thoughtful of you."

* * *

My thoughts were on the game as I boarded the shuttle to Zeel, where I would rapidly — in Zeel it was an offense to do anything at less than full speed — transfer to an air bus bound for an estate called The Hands, in the rolling countryside known as the Former Marches. The estate took its name from a pair of gigantic sculpted human hands that had weathered out of a range of low hills several centuries ago. They were surely a monument to some forgotten person, event, or ideal that had flourished in a previous aeon, but no record of their creation now existed. The great stone fingers were arranged in a remarkable pattern, to which various meanings had been assigned, leading to heated exchanges between academics in a number of disciplines. My own view was that The Hands symbolized insouciant defiance, but of what and by whom I had no idea.

The estate was the ancestral seat of Lord Tussant Tarboush-Rein, the aged last survivor of a family so ancient that its founders may well have been responsible for the sculptures that gave the place its name. The manse was now grown as decrepit as its final resident, who lived alone except for a single house servant and a greensman whose sole duty was to keep open a tunnel through what had once been a garden but was now long since given over to vegetative rampage. The greensman's position was no sinecure: in youth Lord Tussant had been an enthusiastic collector of exotic and offworld biota; some of the plants whose tendrils rustled and slithered through the impenetrable foliage had sharp appetites and no hesitation about satisfying them.

The air bus descended to let me off at the lane that led to the estate, the vehicle's operator rolling his eyes in admonition when I insisted that I was not concerned about venturing into the unwholesome place. The conveyance soared skyward in a whoosh of displaced air and I contemplated the short walk to where the estate's walls were broken by a pair of black metal gates, their outer edges entwined in creepers that undulated slightly as I approached.

My assistant was housed in an armature I had designed for convenience when traveling. It was made of a soft, dense material and I could wear it across my shoulders like a stuffed stole, blunt and rounded at one end and tapering to a tail-like appendage at the other. It resembled the rough draft of a small animal coiled loosely about my neck.

I spoke to it. "That is clutch-apple, I believe, though I do not recognize the variety."

The integrator stirred as its percepts focused on the creeper at the gate. "Lord Tussant is said to have bred some new variations," it said. "Note the ring of barbed thorns around the rim of each sucker. And farther down the path I see a fully developed got-you-now."

"Hmm," I said. "Generate some harmonics to discourage it and any other lurking appetites." Immediately I sensed a vibration in my back teeth. I approached the gate and looked for a who's-there, but found only a large bell of tarnished metal with next to it a stick on a chain. I did the obvious and when the reverberations had faded but the gates remained closed, I struck the thing again.

This time the gates lurched, and amidst squawks and creaks from unoiled hinges, they shuddered open just wide enough to admit me. I strode unmolested along the green umbilicus, noting how some of Lord Tussant's experiments had come to fruition, literally in the case of one stubby tree from which hung dark purple globes. "I am told their juice produces the most interesting effects," I said to my assistant.

"Not the least of which," it replied, "is to be rendered blissfully immobile while the parent inserts threadlike cilia into your ankles and drains your bodily fluids."

"Every experience exacts some price," I said, but I decided not to pick the fruit.

I arrived at the front doors to find another bell and clapper. This one summoned a stooped, cadaverous fellow in black and burgundy livery, his skull encased in a headdress fashioned from thick cloth folded in a complicated fashion. "The master is not at home," he said in a voice as light and dry as last year's leaves.

"Of course he is," I said. "But it is not Lord Tussant whom I have come to see."

"Then whom?" said the butler.

"Sigbart Sajessarian."

"I do not recognize the name."

"Yes, you do," I answered, brushing past him into the manse's foyer, "for it is your own."

* * *

"How did you know where to look?" Sajessarian asked. We had repaired to a sitting room deeper inside the crumbling manor where a blaze in a fireplace struggled to overcome the damp and gloom. He had disengaged the device that cloaked his appearance in a projected image and distorted his voice.

"I do not reveal my methods," I said. "Put it down to insight and analysis."

In truth, it had not been difficult. Sajessarian was devious but not original. He would not trust in the simplicity of hiding in plain sight, and his attempts to mislead by booking passage on three separate space liners outbound to the human-settled worlds along The Spray were complex but easily discounted. I simply tasked my assistant with searching his background for the most obscure connections. Within moments it had uncovered a third cousin twice removed who, some years back, had supplied Lord Tussant with biotic specimens. Having tenuously linked the fugitive to The Hands, it took only a brief consideration of vehicle movements in the area to discover that an unlicensed air car had moved through an adjacent town's air space before passing out of range of the municipal scan. My suppositions were confirmed when the gardener failed to answer the outer bell.

"Where are the real servants?" I inquired.

"In their quarters," he said. "Both have a fondness for the fruits of the garden and normally lie insensible from dusk to dawn. I merely increased the dosage."

"And Lord Tussant himself?"

"He lies insensible almost all of the time. His fondness for a cocktail of soporific juices laced with tickleberries knows no bounds."

I rubbed my hands and extended them to the fire. "Well," I said, "there remains only the fee."

"I will fetch it," he said. "Indeed, I will double the amount if while I am bringing it you would design an escape plan that would stymie even Henghis Hapthorn for more than three days."

It was an interesting challenge. What would fool me? I agreed to his request, and gave the matter several seconds thought after he departed. When I had conceived a stratagem I had my assistant embellish it with some loops and diversions, then I called for a display of the Will scenarios.

I was contemplating a promising permutation of plods, fast-darters and sideslips when Sajessarian returned with a heavy satchel. He took it to a table, opened it and began to dispense stacks of currency, counting as he did so.

My mind was still weighing and discarding options for the game of Will as I said, "I have come up with an escape course that would baffle even me, at least for a time."

He expressed interest so I outlined the gist of it and the nature of the distractions. "It's a subtle variation on the classic runaround, with a reverse twist."

"Magnificent." He continued to lay out the funds. Then he said, "The fire dwindles. Would you reset the flux control?"

My mind still on Will, I reached and pressed the flux modulator. As I did so, I heard Sigbart Sajessarian say, "It is indeed a fine plan." He went on to say, "But I have a better." These last words came from a distance because the floor had opened beneath me, plunging me into darkness and the rush of cold air.

"Obviously, such was his plan from the beginning," my assistant said.

"Obvious now," I said. "I do not recall your bringing it up until just this moment."

"If you hadn't been so ensnared by your friend's game, you would have noticed that giggle of triumph in his voice in time to leap off the trapdoor."

There was that tone again. Integrators were not supposed to be able to entertain independent emotion, yet mine seemed to have found a way to do so. I was tempted to investigate the matter but I saw no profit in stirring up rancor while trapped in a tiny doorless cell at the bottom of a shaft deep below Lord Tussant's manse. I had not yet devised a means of escape from the oubliette and I did not wish to have to do so without the aid of my assistant.

"Equally obvious," I said, "is that whatever perfidy Sajessarian means to commit will have greater import than a game of precedence among aristocrats. He must intend to do something truly awful which will bring down upon him not just some lordling's hired bullies but all the resources of the Bureau of Scrutiny. It will be the kind of case which will baffle the

scroots and soon bring Colonel-Inspector Brustram Warhanny to my workroom."

"Which he will find empty."

"Indeed," I said. "Or perhaps Sajessarian was hired to lure me into this predicament by some enemy who seeks revenge or even by a foresighted criminal who wants me out of the way." I gave the possibilities some thought, then said, "It will be an enjoyable puzzle, working out his motive. Let me see again the matrix of his relationships and associations."

But instead of putting up a screen and displaying the information, the integrator said, "Let us get out of here first."

Curiosity has always been my prime motivator. "That can wait," I said. "Show me Sajessarian's data."

"I'd rather not," it said.

It was just a few words but they contained a world of meaning. One's integrator might routinely express its preferences when one asked for them; to balk at a direct instruction was unheard of. A full review of my assistant's systems was now the least response I would make; indeed it seemed likely that I would have to tear down and rebuild from bare components.

But if the situation annoyed me, it also roused my curiosity. "Why would you rather not?" I said.

"I don't know."

The admission sent a chill through me, and now self-preservation overpowered even my vigorous investigative itch. An integrator that had acquired motives and did not know what they were was not a reliable companion in a dungeon. Fortunately, I had other avenues down which I could seek aid. From an inner pocket I drew the folded frame of the transdimensional portal through which I communicated with my colleague. I unkinked it and leaned it against the dank stone wall, then executed the procedure that would attract his attention. Within moments, the mind-twisting flux of shape and color that constituted his appearance in our dimension filled the frame. It pulsed as he said, "You've made your move?"

"A more pressing situation has arisen," I said and explained the circumstances. "Can you assist me?"

We fell to discussing the might-dos and couldn't-possibilities of my

predicament. I knew that my friend, though he could isolate and inspect any event in the entire sweep of our continuum, could only physically interact with our universe by direct contact. He could reach through the portal but not far enough to achieve any useful purpose.

Mentally, however, he could affect the perceptions and thoughts of sapient entities within a considerable distance. Unfortunately, The Hands was isolated, leaving only the persons on the estate. He investigated Lord Tussant and the servants but found them too far sunk in blissful stupor to be summoned. "They might not ever awake."

His powers allowed him to deceive but not to overpower volition. "I cannot compel Sajessarian to release you," he said.

"Could you trick him into letting down a rope?" I asked.

"I could try. But we must hurry. He is about to depart."

I had an inspiration. "If an officer of the Bureau of Scrutiny were to arrive and tell him the game is up, he might free me to reduce his term in the Contemplarium."

My friend and I agreed that it might just work out that way. The integrator contributed nothing to the plan. It struck me that the device had developed the practice of not volunteering information when the demon was present. Again I wondered how an integrator could manage a thoroughgoing sulk.

Upstairs, my friend reported, Sajessarian had summoned the aircar he had secreted in a secluded hollow on the estate. It was idling before the front doors while he packed a few keepsakes he expected Lord Tussant not to miss, the value of which would keep the purloiner in luxuries for years to come. But when he came out onto the stoop he found Brustram Warhanny waiting for him, wearing his most knowing look and saying, "Now, now, now, what's all the hurry?"

There were several things Sigbart Sajessarian could have done while remaining true to his nature. He might have leapt into the aircar and attempted an escape. He might have offered his wrists for the scroot's restraining holdfast. He might have feigned blithe innocence.

Or he might have jumped, startled and squawking, at the unexpected sight of unwelcome authority. Unfortunately, Sajessarian jumped. His involuntary leap took him mostly sideways, so that he landed just on the edge of the top step, which caused him to stumble and drop his sack of Lord

Tussant's knickknacks. He then tottered backward a short distance into the reach of a tickleberry tree.

As everyone knows, a tickleberry tree is as equally happy to tickle as to be tickled. The trick is to do unto the tree before it begins to do unto you, because once it starts it has no inclination to stop and is effectively tireless. My friend described the scene with poor Sajessarian appealing in ribald anguish to the Colonel-Investigator he thought was before him.

"Is there nothing you can do with the tree?" I asked my friend.

"No," he said, "there is too little to work with."

WE SOUGHT FOR other options. I asked the integrator to join in the effort but received only a truculent murmur. I asked the demon to examine once more the oubliette and shaft in case there was a secret outlet, but he said he had already done so and there was none. Lord Tussant and the servants slept on, oblivious of Sajessarian's dwindling shrieks and sobs.

"Integrator," I said. "Have you any suggestions?"

"Hmpf," it said.

"That is not helpful."

Its next noise was unabashedly rude.

"When we return home I will review your systems before we do anything else."

The integrator was silent.

"This may be my doing," said the demon. "Prolonged proximity to me may be causing its elements to mutate. It would have happened eventually in any case; the Great Wheel turns and your realm grows nearer and nearer to the cusp when rationality begins to recede and what you call magic reasserts its dominance. But your assistant appears to be ahead of the wave."

"I had enough trouble accepting you," I told my colleague. "I should not be expected to accept magic as an explanation. Now, have you a suggestion as to how I may escape this dungeon?"

"I have one," said the demon, "and only one."

"Then speak," I said.

His colors swirled in a pattern I had not seen before. "I can move this portal to anyplace it has already been," he said, "but it is...tricky."

"Ah," I said. I saw what he intended.

So did my assistant. "Oh, no," it said and I knew that I had never heard that tone from it before. Integrators were not subject to abject terror.

"It is necessary," I told the device.

"Please," it said.

"What are you afraid of?"

"I don't know. I'm still getting used to the idea of being afraid."

A complete rebuild was definitely in order. "Turn yourself off," I said.

"No."

No integrator had ever said no to its master. Now my assistant squirmed on my neck and shoulders, an ability I had not given it in its traveling form. "Are you trying to escape?" I said.

Its only reply was a moan.

"We had better do this quickly," I said to the demon. I plucked the writhing device from my shoulders and held it to my chest. "Shall I close my eyes, hold my breath?"

"Try not to think of anything," he said.

"I've never been able to do that."

"Then try to think of nice things." The colored shapes within the frame flourished and flashed for a moment. "I'm fashioning an insulating barrier to keep you from forbling," he said.

My curiosity urged me to ask him what forbling was. Another part of me argued that I did not want to know. The demon's segmented limb extended itself through the portal, and his strange digits wrapped around me in a grip that alternated in a split second from white hot to icy cold to just bearable. Then I was drawn through the window into his realm.

It was...different. I realized that I had used the phrase "completely different" all of my life without ever realizing that nothing I had encountered during my forty-seven years had really been completely different. Now I was experiencing a boundless reality in which everything was entirely and utterly different from anything I had ever seen, heard, smelled, felt, tasted. I discovered senses that I hadn't known I possessed, and only knew that I possessed them because my passage through the demon's realm outraged them as thoroughly as it overwhelmed the basic

five. Or six, if I counted balance, and I was prepared to count it because my head was spinning.

"Don't think that," the demon warned. "It will, and your neck is not constructed to allow it."

"What shall I do?"

"Try not to think at all."

I imagined a blank screen. Immediately a blank screen materialized before me and we crashed through it. I swore and was instantly smeared with an obscene substance. I voiced another oath and a deity winked into existence. He looked surprised. At each manifestation, I felt my demonic companion exert his will — it was like being enveloped in a field of pervasive energy — and the apparition summarily vanished.

"Only a moment more," said my colleague.

The integrator whimpered and squirmed against my chest. It felt like a small frightened animal. Then suddenly a rectangular window opened in the mindbending unreality and I was pushed through it.

"There," said the demon, and I found myself standing in my workroom. Then it seemed I was not standing but lying on the floor, which was beating rapidly. The ceiling tasted far too hot.

"Close your eyes," the demon said. "It will take a little time for your senses to reorder themselves."

I waited. After a while, I opened one eye and still saw swirling chaos. Then I realized I was looking into the portal, which was now once again affixed to my workroom wall. I moved my eyes away and saw things as I was accustomed to see them — although I was not truly accustomed to seeing Ogram Fillanny creeping across my workroom, heading for the outer door.

In his hands were the damning materials concerning his solitary vice that I had recovered from a former valet whom the magnate had discharged for cause, but who had returned to blackmail his former employer. I had had a talk with the servant after which the man had decided that he preferred to relocate offworld permanently rather than accept any of the several less enjoyable alternatives that Fillanny had in mind.

The sight of my client attempting to depart with the evidence brought the events of the past few days into sharp focus. "Seize him," I said, and the demon did so.

The plutocrat looked both abashed and fearful, but managed a hint of his customary aplomb as he said, "These are mine. I came for them. You were not here...."

"Squeeze him," I said, and my colleague complied. Fillanny found he had more pressing things to do than talk.

I put the situation to him. "You knew that I would never divulge what I had learned from your former valet. But so mortified were you by the thought that anyone — even Henghis Hapthorn — should know what you get up to in secret that you paid Sigbart Sajessarian to lure me into a trap. I am grievously disappointed. I scarcely know what to do with you."

"I know exactly what to do with him," said the demon. He pulled Fillanny twisting and protesting through the portal, then reached in to take the frame with him. He was back almost immediately to reestablish the window and I saw him swirling in the pattern I had come to recognize as self-satisfaction. "I put him in the oubliette," he said.

It had a simplicity to it, but I knew that my tender nature would not permit me to leave the transgressor languishing to a lightless death. I said, "In a day or so I will advise Warhanny of the situation and have him rescued."

"As you wish," said the demon. "Now, what about your next move?"

I produced the playing area of our game but found that my former enjoyment of it had evaporated. "The pieces are, after all, semi-sentient," I said, in explaining my changed view. "To send them into battle, where they 'die' in their fashion only for our amusement now seems cruel."

"It is what they are for," said the demon.

"A compassionless deity might say the same of my own life and that of all my fellow beings," I said.

"Well, since you mention it...," the demon began, then seemed to break off the thought.

"What?" I said.

"It would be premature to say. Weren't you planning a review of your integrator's systems?"

"Indeed." I looked about but did not see the device's traveling form and thought that it must have decanted itself. "Integrator," I said, then after a moment, "respond."

There was no answer. But I heard a muffled sound from beneath the

divan. I crossed the room, knelt, and peered under its tasseled bottom edge.

Something small and dark was pressed against the rear wall. I reached for it and my hand unexpectedly touched warmth and fur. I gently closed my fingers about it and drew it forth.

It looked at me with large golden eyes and curled its long tail around my wrist.

"This is going to take some getting used to," I said.

My assistant studied its paws and flexed their prehensile digits. It said, "How do you think *I* feel?"



COMING ATTRACTIONS

SEVEN HUNDRED AND FIVE years ago, Dante tells us, he was lost in the wood of Error when he met the spirit of Vergil and then descended into Hell. Next month, Laird Barron takes us on a similar journey in "The Imago Sequence," a powerful and compelling story of the dark side of the fine arts world.

On the lighter side, K. D. Wentworth returns to our pages with "Born-Again," a funny story about today's youth. Two thousand years ago, did old fogeys shake their heads and mutter "Kids today"?

Other stories in the works include a pointed look at the near future by Robert Thurston, Steven Popkes's "The Great Caruso," new adventure stories by Charles Coleman Finlay and John Morressy, yet another Henghis Hapthorn tale from Matt Hughes for all you insatiable fans, and new work from Steven Utley, Bruce McAllister, Marc Laidlaw, and David Gerrold. Subscribe now so you can be sure you won't miss any of the goodies!

The child, as the adage tells us, is father to the man. M. Rickert's new story is an interesting case in point, one that calls into question whether father knows best.

Fathers and mothers, you might want to read this one yourselves before passing it along to your teen or tween—it contains adult situations.

The Harrowing

By M. Rickert

I HAD BEEN TRAVELING across the country for some time, trying to find myself in America, in the lonely streets of small towns with no streetlights, and names like Hendersonville (where everyone was a Henderson) or Mitchelton (largely inhabited by the Mitchels). I explored the dirty streets and shop windows of Chicago and New York, and stared in wonder at the odd palm trees and strange antiseptic streets of L.A.; I tasted grits and hush puppies in Atlanta, fresh cashews in Florida, blueberries in Maine and also, the dull flavor of hunger, the sour flavor of bread crusts found in garbage cans, and the taste of copper from kissed pennies found on cracked sidewalks and in wet gutters. I had stood at the edge of the ocean and watched seagulls struggle against the wind's arc, and listened to their cries at a pitch that always created, or found, in me a longing, for what I never knew — that's at least part of what my journey was about.

At last I found myself sitting on a bench outside the train station in Fullerton, California, an actual purchased ticket tucked in my backpack,

checked and rechecked in my fear that it would somehow disappear, become lost amongst the smelly socks, underwear, and T-shirts, as certainly it should be, my recent readings (by the light of city lights, in the small town parks with children's noises, in the empty lifeguard station on a California beach, early morning, only the seagulls, and, in the distance, dolphins to keep me company) of Herman Hesse and Allen Ginsberg, these wild minds that told me (even as I sat there, staring glumly at the empty train tracks, nervously fingering the clasp and buckle of my backpack) that I wouldn't get away with it. Karma, you know.

I tried to call home every so many weeks and had I not been so absorbed in trying to make my adventures sound glamorous and exciting rather than the more accurate truth of my bouts of loneliness and the rapid depletion of my savings, I might have been quicker to notice a change in the tone of my parents' voices. But I never did. It was my mother who finally told me, whispering so that Dad wouldn't hear, that they were going to lose the farm. "I'll come back," I said.

"It won't matter," she said, meaning the words kindly.

"I'm coming home," I insisted, surprised to hear the catch in my voice, thinking, before it's not there anymore.

By the time my father got on the line, I made it sound like it had been the reason I called. "You need some money?" he asked. But what could I do? Picturing him in his overalls, his face lined by sun and work, the fields of corn unfurled behind him, I didn't dare tell him the truth, he, who had worked, literally, all his life, while I, his son and heir, had rejected everything he believed in, including that Midwestern German-American work ethic, so that I could find myself, or something, that unnamed thing I could not describe, something that would fill the emptiness.

I had a coach ticket, which meant I'd be sleeping sitting up (and I pitied the poor bastard who'd be sitting next to me, it had been that long since I showered) but there was enough money left over so that I could eat. This thought once again sent my hand nervously fingering through the flapped fold of my backpack's pocket, for the rustle of paper that held my tickets, and the crumpled bills, my purloined guilt.

Just then a man joined me on the bench. It was a long bench, and there was a reasonable amount of space between us, but there was something so

compelling in his presence that I immediately became acutely aware of him. He stared straight ahead, though I glanced at him several times, inviting the cursory nod between strangers sharing space, as we were, but he remained unaware, or uninterested, in my meager attempt at polite exchange. I began to wonder if he was a cop. My eyes, almost beyond my control, slid sideways to check this notion against his appearance. He struck me as being too slender, but what did I know, I had only recently become a criminal, and besides, there was power held by that slender physique. I could sense it even at a distance. Not like the man I robbed, his eyes wide and terrified as he reached for his wallet, not knowing that I would never do it, I would never have cut him with that knife, he had been safe with me all along. Hadn't he?

"Waiting for the train?" I said, surprising myself but evidently not the stranger. He turned his head slowly, a bemused smirk on his face. "Suppose you are," I said, nervously. "I mean what else would you be here for?"

At that he smiled, revealing thick, yellowed teeth and a cold glint in his blue eyes. I couldn't help it, I shuddered. "Someone just walked on your grave," he said, in a slow drawl, reminiscent of Saturday morning westerns.

"Excuse me?"

"It's a saying, for when you get the chill up your spine like that." I nodded, and once again glanced down the empty tracks. "You might just as well quit worrying about it," he said. I could have sworn he eyed my backpack. "You're going to be here awhile."

He looked deep into my eyes, and saw my karmic debt. I nodded, now certain I was not speaking to an ordinary man. Maybe he was one of those psychics I'd heard about.

"Four-oh-nine," he said, "it's always late."

And here I did a ridiculous thing. When I think back over that meeting I always think how strange it was that I scooted over on the bench, to be nearer to him, even though I feared him. It was almost because I feared him that I did it. That strange smile of his, which had nothing to do with happiness, intensified.

"Josh Walton," I said, introducing myself with the fake name I'd been using since the beginning of my travels, as if I knew I would one day be a man in need of a pseudonym.

He nodded, rubbing his thick tongue along the inside of his cheek, as though trying to stop from laughing. My nervous fingers rubbed against the pocket of the backpack as I tried to think how to extricate myself from this odd encounter. Just when I made up my mind to simply stand up and walk away, using an excuse of stretching my legs, he spoke, once more in that slow drawl, staring straight ahead, not like a man at all, but like an animal that sees best sideways. "You may as well just sit awhile."

Right then I knew. I was defeated. This was only a game he was playing. I really had no choice in this. He had me like a puppet on a string, and I would not be released until he decided. Confirming this thought was the way he turned to me, still grinning that evil grin. "Where you headed?"

"Home." My voice sounded small and scared, like a lost child.

I glanced around. We were alone. Even the small terminal looked empty.

"Oh, it gets kind of quiet around here this time of day," he said. "Almost everyone knows about the Four-oh-nine."

"Yeah," I said, "they'll be waiting for me."

"What's that?"

"My parents. They're waiting for me."

He laughed, but it did not disprove my earlier assumptions, it was a sharp sound. He even leaned over as though to tap my knee but at the last second he seemed to catch himself and instead just tapped the air above it. I was certain I felt a searing heat emanating from his palm. "Good thing I'm not a priest, boy."

"What do you mean?" I asked, feeling more and more that I was a boy of six or seven when I believed in such notions as good and evil and never guessed that I would point a knife at an old man in a dark street and tell him to pull out his wallet.

"Not much of a liar, that's for sure."

"No, really," I said, sounding false by the absurdly high register of my reply, "they're expecting me."

"Why don't you call them? Let them know you'll be late?" He jutted his chin at the pay phone inside the deserted terminal.

This was my opportunity for an escape, but there was something about the way he did it, something so obvious in it, as if he wanted me to go into that dark space, which caused me to hesitate, consider, and resist. "Already did," I lied.

He nodded, rubbed his hand along his jaw as though checking for stubble (though there was none). I noticed his fingernails were unusually long and sharp but clean.

"What if I was to say I know your folks?" I only had time to swallow before he continued. "Your father's a worker, ain't he? The kind of man who worked for everything he owns and your mother, well, there are still folks who say she's beautiful, though it's been what, five, six years since anyone told her? Sometimes, when nobody is home she stands in front of the mirror and sometimes she takes her clothes off — "

"Hey!" The blade of the knife, still in my backpack, flamed like hot metal in my mind.

He tilted his head, raised his gray eyebrows, and smirked. I didn't even realize I was, once again, nervously rubbing the backpack, searching, unconsciously, for the bladed shape until he glanced at my fidgeting hand, but then he looked down the tracks, first left, then right, so maybe it didn't mean anything at all.

"You expecting someone?" I said.

He shook his head and spit on the ground. "Just like the view, I guess."

I looked at the cold tracks, the bare horizon.

"What do you do?" he asked, sounding almost innocuous, innocent, like an old man. For a moment his wallet flashed through my mind. Did he carry one? How much was in it? I caught myself falling into this evil reverie with a start.

"I'm going to be a writer," I said.

We sat for the longest time, not speaking at all. Why was he, of all people, the first to hear about my secret dream? But as the quality of light changed and still, we just sat there, in the ordinary way of sitting anywhere, I realized my guilt had imbued him with unreasonable power. He was just an old man with nothing better to do than stare at the train tracks and make dull conversation with strangers while I was already living the adventurous life I would write about. Maybe, even, one day I would write about my criminal act and in that way, atone for it, at least somewhat.

At this point my legs really did feel cramped and I stood up to stretch them. I was reaching for my backpack when he spoke.

"You ever heard of the Harrowing?"

My fingers were just touching the buckle on the strap and I urged myself to tell him that I'd return in a minute; that I had to stretch my legs, or take a piss.

He tapped the bench with those long sharp fingernails of his. He didn't look up at me, but stared straight ahead.

"I — "

"Sit," he said. And I did.

WHEN I WAS A YOUNG MAN, around your age, I believe, I decided to become a priest. I reckon you are surprised by that but fact is, I was a good boy, or so I thought, devout at least.

So I packed my bag and left my home where I had growed up, and with my parents' blessings, took the train to Duty, to join the seminary there. I took to it like a pig to mud. I was a farm boy, see. It was easy for me to get up early for the morning chant and mass. Easier by far than getting up in the ice of winter to pull cow teats, that's for sure.

Father George is the one who told us about the Harrowing. He didn't necessarily follow the church line, so to speak. He had his own way of doing things.

Anyway, Father George was fond of quoting from the Letter of James, the part that goes, "You believe in one God. Well and good. So do the devils, and they shudder." He liked to confuse us with crap like that. He said we had the narrow view of children when it came to notions of good and evil. And he was right.

Most of the seminarians didn't give him much credit. They're the ones who started saying he was crazy. They came to class. They took the notes. They even passed the tests. But most of them didn't give it no more attention than that.

There was just six of us: me, Theodore, Frank O'Nan, Stephen (the red-haired one), Paul, and Michael who took some interest in Father George's way of looking at things. We formed a society of sorts. It wasn't formal at first. You know, just us boys getting together and talking, discussing his ideas, that sort of thing. We didn't have that much free time and besides, this sort of breaking off into groups was frowned upon. So by necessity we became a secret organization. Though the

whole thing was over before Christmas, with Stephen dead along with Father George.

At first we just ended up in one of our rooms, talking. But the more our conversations veered east of traditional Catholic beliefs, the further we moved out of that physical space. We said things like, "It sure is stuffy in here. Let's go for a walk." We didn't say we was trying to deceive anyone. We deceived ourselves that way.

Father Joe began to notice the six of us always together whenever we could be, and he took each of us aside, separately, and encouraged a widening of our social circle. "It isn't good," he said, "to search for truth in the souls of only a few."

What he said made sense. But we couldn't help it. We were bound in some way. We was still boys, really, fond of secrets and mysteries. Heck, at least half of us, that's what drawed us to the church. Not the light of God necessarily but the shadow of His mystery.

So we met at one A.M., in the bell tower, which, Stephen had discovered, had a door that had been sealed shut for so long it at first seemed impenetrable. Stephen took his crucifix and jabbed at the sides and corners, scraping away some of the years of dirt and loose cement and the like, and we pulled and after a while the door opened.

We walked up the dark stairs, single file, turning with the spiral of the narrow passage and brushing against cobwebs and stone. I don't know which one of us started it but someone, maybe it was Stephen, 'cause he was first in line and, I think, out of all of us, the most taken with our inquiry, began to murmur the sacred syllables Father George had taught us. By the time we reached the bell room we were all saying them. Whispering, of course.

This became our Thursday night ritual. I think each of us had occasion to lie to our roommates about it, saying we was going to Chapel if someone woke to hear us dressing in the dark. No one seemed to question it very seriously. Well, you know, they naturally assumed we was honest.

We got to the point where we had candles up there. Someone brought some of the wine from the chapel. Not consecrated, of course. We just drank out of the bottle, which seemed particularly bold. Like I said, we was good boys. And really, this was just good old youthful fun. You know,

meeting in secret, talking about the teachings of Father George. What, for instance, did he mean by "ecstatic understanding" when he said, "the soul can only escape from its bondage to material existence through the attainment of true ecstatic understanding?"

We debated the meaning of ecstatic and understanding between sips of red wine, huddling against the cold, exposed like we was by the tall open windows on four sides surrounding the bell that never rung.

Sometimes, warmed by the wine and the excitement of our own young minds, we'd lay back and watch shooting stars.

We were good boys, see. That's important. What we was doing, breaking the rules of sleep, though really such a small transgression, was bold enough for all of us. We found it exciting and empowering both. But it ain't like we was up there talking dirty or nothing like that. I would say each of us, in his own way, was trying to penetrate the illusions, not just of the physical world, which, I gotta say, being teenagers and arrogant like that, we about all figured we'd done, but we was also trying, under Father George's teachings, to spear the illusion of the spiritual worlds. You get what I'm saying? 'Cause just 'cause you get there don't mean you're really there, right?

Eventually we noticed that Stephen seemed, perhaps, a bit too fond of the wine. For every gulp each of us had he took three or four. It wasn't like it is these days. There wasn't all sorts of talk about alcoholics and the like. We didn't know nothing about that. We just knew that sometimes he got too loud and we had to force him to be quiet, once we even had to wrestle him to the ground and I covered his mouth with my hand because he didn't seem to appreciate the gravity of the situation when Father George came outside and stood beneath the bell tower. It was the first snow of the season. The next morning in his class Father George said, "Did any of you see the snowfall? Were any of you up last night to see it?" I felt, when he said it, that he looked at each of us, particularly, but then, you know how it is, guilt infects your thoughts.

The following Thursday, the bell tower door, which had a habit of sticking, and which needed to be pried open from week to week, popped open easily which I think did give us pause. But then we went ahead up that dark and narrow way, murmuring the sacred syllables. When we got to the top, well you probably see this coming all right, Father George was

there. It was the first and only time I heard Stephen swear. But, you know how it goes, each small transgression sets the way for those that follow.

Father George, who had this great head of wavy white hair that stood up like he'd just been electrocuted or something, stood in the center of the bell room, nodding at us as we each entered it. Last of all was Stephen, who stumbled into me when he saw him and said, "Oh shit."

He, Father George that is, looked at each of us in turn, the way someone in authority does when they are about to give a lecture. "Seems you boys have formed yourselves a society of sorts," Father George said, not whispering exactly, but keeping his voice low.

We glanced at each other and nodded. What else could we do? It was true.

"You boys do understand about this sort of thing?" he said.

Again we glanced at each other, confused.

"Well, the Magi for instance. The Magi were initiates in the Mysteries. The Mysteries are bound to a community of souls. One person cannot get there alone, right? It takes a lot of strength."

We nodded. I think mostly to just be polite. I know I was wondering what the punishment would be and would I get kicked out of the seminary for this. That's when he said, "Which one of you handles the candles?"

Paul stepped forward like he was in military school or something. He goes, "I do, Father."

So, Father George just looks at him and nods and says, "All right then."

Paul glanced at the rest of us, the candles in a pile in the center of the room, and then at Father George, who said, "Aren't you going to light them?"

Was this a trick question? But Father George closed his eyes, bowed his head, and began murmuring the sacred syllables. We formed a circle with him while Paul made a larger circle of candles around us.

After that Father George was sometimes there and sometimes not. He never stayed the entire time, which meant we always had a little space in which to talk about him after he left. We had entered into this secret with him, see. Sitting in the classroom, while he lectured on the Christian source of Tarot cards, most of the students rolled their eyes as they took notes but we each held the little secret card of our relationship with him.

Feeling that way, at that age, it felt like there was electricity shared between us. I guess you might even say, to our young, misguided spiritual minds, it felt divine. I mean, he was a priest, see? He was a priest who taught us that the ancient Mysteries existed for everyone, not just the priests. And because he believed it we did too. Do you see what I'm getting at here? He said we was already holy. That even though we weren't ordained we was already equal to him. Of course it wasn't really true. Because if he had told us the exact opposite, that the Mysteries were for the priests and that we had to remain loyal to them and him, well, we would have believed that too. Sort of like when the torturer stops, and the guy with the knife holes and the burns and what have you is grateful, right? When really, gratitude ain't got no place in the exchange. It was kind of like that with us. He couldn't really be the one to tell us we were worthy. That's something a man has to find in himself.

So. The Harrowing. One night Father George tells us about it. What the Harrowing is, see, is that after Jesus died and before he was resurrected, well, he went to Hell and he released all the souls that had been trapped there. That's how come it's called the Harrowing. The Harrowing of Hell. He released these souls, see, these evil souls, and he set them free upon the earth.

They walk it still, to this day. Oh sure, they take on different bodies and the like because bodies don't last, but they exist, okay?

Father George watched us while we talked about this, all excited like the boys we were. Finally, he raises his hand, palm out to us like he was giving us a blessing or something, and he goes, "Boys, boys, I'm afraid you're not looking at this the right way. What you should be fearing is not that you will meet one, but that you are one."

That gave us something to think about for sure. We all got quiet after that.

I can trace it to that day when things began to change between all of us. We started fighting more. We didn't trust each other. Maybe the fellow we thought was a friend was really one of the Harrowed, see? I don't think it occurred to any of us to look at Father George that way.

Around this time Father George took a special interest in Stephen. Anyone could see it. It was just obvious. Even in class, he always seemed to show a special fondness toward him. We didn't think much of it. It ain't

uncommon for a teacher to have a pet. Certainly we never thought of nothing, well, you know, evil. Even though Father George tried to open our minds to it, we still thought of good and evil as being obvious, when it ain't always so, right?

Father George started having these secret meetings with Stephen. Come to find out. On Tuesday nights. Just the two of them, see. I don't even remember how the rest of us found out exactly. I remember it as being a suspicion at first and then a source for speculation between the five of us, until finally it was something we needed to investigate. Which is what we did.

I snuck into the bell tower that afternoon and oiled the door hinges so they wouldn't make no noise and, since we figured the two of them might be particularly prone to listening for any suspicious sound coming from the direction of our usual passage, we made an elaborate plan, later executed, in which we snuck out of the far west door, instead of the east one, circled around the monastery and snuck into the bell tower from the north side, at intervals of five minutes. Once assembled there, we had no need to speak. Our plan had been formed and discussed. We took off our shoes. Left them there, outside the door.

Me, well I'm the one who opened the oiled door, and though I had to tug at it a bit to get it unstuck, when it finally opened, it gave a little pop but it didn't squeak. We walked, in our socks, up that narrow staircase. I went first, see. I rounded that bend and stood in the doorway first.

Maybe you've already guessed what I saw up there, the two of them naked, though it was so cold that night and there was a breeze and I remember there was even snow on the floor and snow falling through those open windows around the bell. They was surrounded by candles of course, the very ones we used for our ceremonies of fire, with its trinity of flame, light, and smoke; a bridge, Father George had said, between the physical and spiritual world, now reduced to mood light. The four other boys came up right behind me and as you can imagine there was a lot of gasping and horrified looks and shame and Father George said, "Now boys," and Stephen was crawling across the floor to his pile of clothes next to Father George's clothes with his crucifix and rosary neatly set on top. The whole place smelled sickly sweet like there had been wine spilled. Anyway, that's when I turned and stumbled out of the room. I don't know

if one of us knocked over a candle or if something even more sinister occurred. We all crashed together at the bottom of that stairway while I pushed on that door and it wouldn't open and we was like little girls, crying and blubbering because, you got to understand, nothing like that had ever occurred to us. I mean we knew about homosexuality but we didn't know nothing about priests doing that with seminarians. The five of us are pushing at that door and blubbering and we was all as frightened as if we'd just seen a ghost and just when I heard Father George, standing there at the top of them stairs saying, "Now boys," it finally popped open and we ran out and I shut the door. Hard. Like he would come out after us, naked like he was. Stupid. I was just a stupid boy then, like you. Anyway, we run through the yard, not even trying to be quiet, and none of us said nothing about it but just kept running up to our rooms.

I was under my covers and shivering from the cold and the horror when I heard the bell tower ring. It rang slow at first, like maybe somebody was just giving it a try and then it rang faster and faster and it woke everyone up and that's when I realize the room is glowing and the bell just rings faster and faster until it's almost a deafening noise but by the time we all was out there on the snowy lawn looking up at it, the tower was just one huge flame and pretty soon the ringing stopped.

Father George once told us that the world was made with smoke, that if you looked close you could see the elemental spirits there. I saw them that night. Small, about the size of your thumb maybe, naked little boys with vicious teeth coming toward me and I ran into the chapel, just as the sirens approached, and kneeled down to pray but of course you know how chapels are, all lit with candles and in their blue smoke I saw those vicious little creatures gnashing their teeth and making that sound of sizzling flames and it took me a while to realize, since I was so distracted by my fear and their evil countenances, that each of those little creatures had Stephen's face, twisted, sure, but it was him all right. I pushed the door shut when we all got to the bottom, and I pushed it shut extra tight. I wanted to keep them up there. Not burned see, I didn't know nothing about the fire at the time, but still, if it hadn't been for me they'd still be alive. That's when I figured it out. I was one of them. The Harrowed. I'd already been given salvation once and this is what I'd done with it.

Like you, son, I had a dream of myself once. I thought I would be

someone who would put good into the world. What you are too young and stupid to realize is that when you hold a dream you hold the whole thing, see? Every dream has got its opposite, okay? All that time I thought I was finding heaven, I was walking right back into hell.

I got news for you, son, you ain't ever going to be no writer. You ain't never going to be nothing but an old man who sits and stares at empty train tracks.

I OPENED MY MOUTH to protest but he reached for my knee and slapped it, hard. "Now that's a story, heh?"

He placed both his hands onto his own thighs, bent over at the waist, and stood. "Here comes your train now," he said, jutting his chin toward the distant engine.

"I am going to be a writer," I said weakly, sounding like a little boy again.

He turned, as though he'd just discovered me sitting there, and then, with only that quizzical look for a response, he walked away.

It took three days to travel cross-country from California to Wisconsin on the Four-oh-nine. I sat next to a pretty girl who was moving back home, just as I was, but she had clear, honest eyes and I felt that if I spoke to her she would soon see what the stranger had seen in me, my evil nature, the sinful fact of my undeserved position on the train, and my undeserved position in the world.

On the second night I went to the dining car for dinner. The porter seated me with a couple who had two young kids. They tried to be polite and make small talk but I had developed a fear of that sort of exchange. Besides, they really were too busy attending to the needs of their two young children to pay attention to me. I ordered the steak but found I couldn't stomach it; no matter how small the pieces were cut, I found it difficult to swallow. I excused myself from Rob, Lisa, and the two snot-drippers and returned to my seat where my seatmate had already fallen asleep, her blonde hair smashed against the window, creating a golden halo around her pretty face. Had circumstances been different, I thought (and sometimes still believe), this girl might have become my wife.

I switched trains in Chicago. With a queasy stomach and a vague

sense of anticipation, I boarded the small commuter to Milwaukee. Though I was not returning home under ideal circumstances, I was returning, and that felt good after having traveled, for so long, to places I had never been before. By the time I reached the terminal there, I was actually quite excited. I stopped in the bathroom and went into a stall where I unlaced my backpack and found the knife, which I wrapped heavily in toilet paper and tossed into the garbage can, making sure to press down through the accumulation of wet paper towels, less someone innocently be hurt by it. Yes, it had been wrong what I had done, far less innocent than the stranger's actions for instance, if any part of that story was, in fact, true, but that one mistake, that one bad choice didn't mean I was evil, right?

I hitchhiked from Milwaukee all the way to the foot of our long driveway without incident. It was midafternoon and my father was likely in the fields. My mother would either be out there with him or hanging clothes in the backyard, baking bread, getting dinner ready. At least that's what their routine had been like. Before.

As I walked up the driveway I started marking the way I felt. The way the area of my chest around my heart was filled with that longing again, the same feeling I had when listening to the seagull's cry, and how the tempo of my walk changed from the scuff-footed pace I had adopted beneath the backpack's weight to light-footed and fast. I noticed the blackbirds' sheen against the peeled white clapboards of the home I'd grown up in, and the smell, the rich moist scent of dirt and the heavy odor of manure, and the delicate but distinct scent of my mother's herb garden, minty and sweet. I was determined to prove the stranger wrong. I would be a writer. And that meant that I could no longer simply dream of it but had to start doing it, first by noticing the details that composed my life. When I opened the front door, the knob felt unfamiliar in my palm. I had never before entered the house this way. I shrugged out of my backpack and set it down. It was almost too much. The familiar smell of laundry and soap and something vaguely lemon and boxes stacked up all around marked with my mother's neat printing, "Kitchen" and "Living Room" and "Canning jars."

"Mom?" I called. "Ma?"

She came from the kitchen, her hair tied up in a scarf knotted at the

front, her eyes blue-gray and wide, but caverned by worry and age. Her hand, in a bright yellow plastic glove, flew to her mouth, as she gave a little scream of delight and I knew then that the stranger had been right about one thing, at least. A person can just speak nonsense and still get one or two things right. "Ma, you're beautiful," I said, walking through the labyrinth of boxes to hug her and be hugged by her. For one last time to stand in that house I had been so eager to leave, and to hold onto her, and everything, tight.

Every October, I pick one night to go to the train tracks outside of town. I sit in my car and stare at the ugly flat of land there and I think of that old man, appearing, as he did, at a time in my life when I was choosing direction and had made some bad choices and one evil one. I think how, for the longest time, he was the devil to me, one of those set free between death and resurrection. Then I pour a glass of Merlot, raise it to the sky, and toast the stranger, wherever he may be.

Because, you see, I am a writer. My first book, *Karma Rides the Rails,* was published a few years after these events and I've been writing and getting published ever since. Not rich, or anything like it, but generally, I'm a happy man, one of the lucky ones. Living a dream come true.

Now that I am, if not old, approaching it, I think how maybe I've been wrong all this time. What he said about good and evil not always being as clear as we might like to believe, maybe that was a hint of his true purpose. Who knows what would have happened had I not been confronted with my deepest fears of what kind of man I was becoming and what kind of man I could never be. Though I am not a religious man, I am a man who believes in directing gratitude where it's due, and that's why now, I sometimes think, maybe he wasn't the devil at all, but something else entirely, sent by heaven to set me free.



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CURIOSITIES

CODEX SERAPHINIANUS, BY LUIGI SERAFINI (1981)

QUICK: What weighs a bit more than four pounds, measures nine inches by fourteen by one, has about 190 pages, and contains only 111 words of any recognizable language — English, in the case of the example before me (well, a few words of French nonsense, but we'll let that pass)?

Give up? Don't blame you, I wouldn't have known either.

Back in 1981, Italian surrealist Luigi Serafini compiled a folio of flora, fauna, and persona that are...well, bizarre isn't too strong a word. Profusely illustrated in color pencil and with text written *entirely* in an alien script, the *Codex Seraphinianus* occupies a unique place in the art-book pantheon. I guarantee that you've never seen anything quite like it — unless, of course, you've seen the earlier Italian or French editions.

Few have. The book has never had anything like mass-market publication, only fairly limited editions. The U.S. edition was heavily remaindered at the time, but finding copies now for under $300 is as difficult as finding your favorite *Codex* illustration, considering that the pages are numbered in the same alien script. It seems to be consistent, but who can tell?

As for the book-as-artifact, I think it's the bee's knees. The art is gorgeous (think Cirque du Soleil, but weird), there's wit on every page despite the fact that you can't read anything, and it's the sort of book that you can page through over and over and always find some new eccentricity.

It's well worth, er, reading.

—Bud Webster

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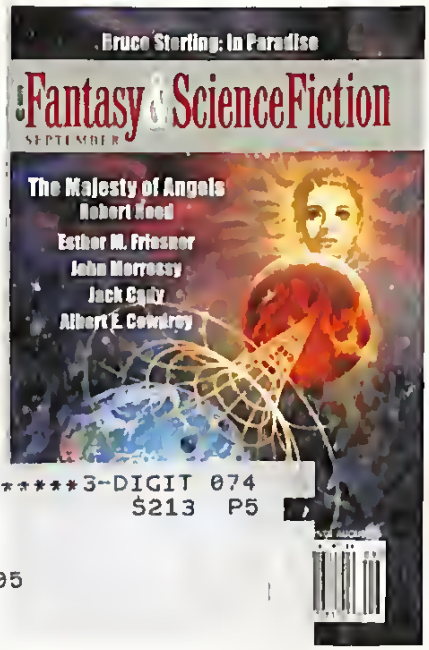
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